



## 006 by [mcplestreet](#)

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**Summary:** On a rainy night in the middle of Christmas break Steve spotted a figure hunched over the garbage can outside his house. He must have gotten too close to her liking because she stepped back. Her jacket had pulled up enough to expose up to three inches of skin. Steve was pretty sure he could feel his heart stop at the sight of black ink numbers. 006. multichapter OC/Steve COMPLETE

## 1. 006

I've never done an OC story for stranger things before but I've had this idea for awhile. I hope you guys like it!

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*December 15th 1984*

Steve Harrington sat at the kitchen table of his empty house staring at yet another rejection letter. He had three more tucked away in the bottom of the garbage can in his room. But this time there was no point in hiding it. He tossed the letter in the kitchen garbage and hardly bothered covering it up. His parents were out of town until after the new year down in Florida. Steve had been left alone for long periods of time for years. His parents had always had the decency to be home for Christmas or his birthday. Until now.

He brought his hands to his face in an attempt to rub the sleep out of his eyes. Dark circles had made a permanent home under his eyes ever since the events of Halloween week. Images of the Upside Down, the demodogs, and Will Byers passed out in his room in clothes drenched with sweat haunted him at night. Sleep had become his enemy. The only reason he had managed to keep up with his school work was because he was up until at least four AM every night. He had a lot of time on his hands and there was only so much of it he could fill with television and sports.

One of the only things keeping him sane was the kids. Every weekend after dinner he picked them all up and drove them into the woods and to Hopper's cabin so they could meet up with their telekinetic friend. Seeing them, so young yet so much better equipped to handle what they'd been through than he was, made him feel more motivated to keep his head above water. Dustin's mother had appointed him Dustin's official baby sitter so it wasn't uncommon for him to spend his weeknights at the Henderson house playing video games and ignoring homework.

But Claudia had taken off of work for Christmas break, leaving Steve alone in a big empty house. The soundtrack of his night being rain tapping on the roof.

He stood with his eyes glued on the rejection letter sitting atop a pile of takeout containers and microwavable food boxes. It seemed his plan to work for his father would end up playing out after all, only excluding the part that included Nancy. For a little while he had actually been hopeful that he could do something with his life after high school. That he could get out of Hawkins.

"Screw this." He muttered as he bent down to tie up the garbage bag. He didn't even bother getting a rain jacket as he headed for the back door.

Steve took two steps out the door and stopped dead in his tracks. The outside light was already on. Though that wasn't always uncommon, it was motion activated and the occasional squirrel set it off. What was uncommon was the shadow of a person cast from the side of the house and the sound of rusting a few feet away. As slowly and quietly as he could Steve set the garbage bag down on the ground and started towards the side of the house where the family kept the garbage cans.

The shadow on the ground was long and lanky in an eerie sort of way. Other than that he couldn't make out much. His heart started to pound. Had someone from the lab tracked him down? What would they want from him? Should he run up to his room and get his nail bat?

Every step he took threatened to give him away but he managed to peek his head around the corner. His eyes landed on someone bent over one of the garbage cans and digging around in it. The baggy jacket they wore with the hood pulled over their head made it impossible for him to make out any details of their appearance. Rain water from the gutter poured out next to them and splashed onto their boots. As he got closer he could see them shivering.

Only a few feet away from the stranger Steve stepped on a twig that cracked loudly under his foot. He watched their hooded head snap in his direction. Heavy shadows were cast across their face but he was easily able to make out piercing blue eyes that stopped him dead in his tracks. Though he couldn't see them well he could see fear written across their face as clear as day.

Steve held his hands up. "Hey, it's okay." He said as gently as he could. "I'm not going to hurt you, alright?" Blue eyes the size of saucers darted from his face to his hands at the speed of light. They looked like a scared animal in the direct line of a predator. "I'm going to come over there to we can talk, okay?"

He took a few steps towards them, close enough to make out their features easier. Enough to figure out they were a girl. He must have gotten too close to her liking because she stepped back. Her hands still gripped onto the garbage can tight enough for her knuckles to go white. His eyes drifted down to her wrist, where her jacket had pulled up enough to expose up to three inches of skin. Steve was pretty sure he could feel his heart stop at the sight of black ink numbers.

006.

## 2. Getting to Know You

yikes I'm posting this without proofreading it because I haven't posted anything on this account in so long and I'm kind of anxious to post again. Hope you enjoy chapter two of this story regardless of the many typos there likely are

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The two sat in silence on opposite sides of the kitchen table. Her eyes were fixed in front of her and she was still shivering. Yet she kept on her soaking wet jacket and backpack. Steve could hear her foot tapping lightly on the ground as her leg bounced up and down nervously. He wondered what it had been like when the kids found Eleven. Had she been so shut down?

He cleared his throat and figured he could try to get her talking again. "You want to tell me your name?" he asked. "Where you're from? Anything about you?"

Her eyes glanced up from the table to look at him. He couldn't decide if she was glaring at him or if she was just intense looking. In the light of the kitchen he could now see her more easily. Blunt cut black bands hung on her forehead and her eyebrows peeked out from underneath them. Her skin was fair and she had a pair of dark circles that matched his own. After a few seconds, of which she remained silent, she looked back down at the table.

Steve let out a small sigh and leaned back in his chair. "Are you hungry?" from what he could make out of her underneath her jacket she was thin. He figured she'd been digging through the trash for food scraps. "I can make you something to eat?"

Her shoulders twitched just enough for him to take it as a shrug. Good enough for him.

He got up from the table and walked over to the fridge. Steve pulled out the bread and cold cut slices. While he grabbed a plate from the cabinet he saw her looking at him. The second he met her glance she looked back down at the table in front of her. Only a minute or two later he brought the sandwich over and slid the plate towards her.

She stared at it for a moment without moving an inch. "I didn't poison it." He told her. "It's okay."

Slowly she brought her hands out from under the table and picked it up. The first bite she took was hesitate. All the ones that followed made it clear just how hungry she was. Her fingernails had chipped black nail polish and he could just see the top of the tattoo on his arm.

She was halfway done eating when he spoke up again. "I have a friend, you know." He said. "She has a tattoo like yours. And she can do things. With her mind." The girl paused and looked up at him. Her eyes searched his face before falling back down to the table. "She can move things with her mind. And she can find people."

She lowered the sandwich. Though she didn't look directly at him her eyes moved up slightly. "What's her number?" she asked. Her voice was quiet, barely loud enough for him to make out. He had to hold back a smile that she'd finally spoken.

"Eleven."

She took another bite. "I don't know her." She said once she had swallowed.

"And your number is six?" he asked.

When she looked up at him again he was sure that this time she was glaring. "My name is Charlie."

Steve nodded a few times. "Okay, Charlie." She looked back down as she continued eating. For a moment Steve wondered if he should get her something else to eat. How long had it been since her last meal? "You can do things too, can't you?"

After taking the last bite she slid the plate away from her. "Nothing as cool as telekinesis." She said. Her eyes met his and they both fell silent. Moments passed, neither of them moving an inch, with the rain outside the only sound in the room. He noticed a small stream of blood dripping from her nose only a second before she reached up to wipe it away. Steve knew that the blood meant she was using her

powers but he didn't see anything in the room change. What was she doing? "I appreciate your sympathy." She said before leaning back in the chair. "But I don't need it. I'm a big girl."

"You were digging through my trash." Steve pointed out. She didn't seem to have a response since she simply stared at him. "Do you have new clothes to change into? Ones that aren't soaking wet?"

Charlie shifted in the chair slightly. "No," she admitted. "There's room for more important things." She reached over her shoulder and patted her backpack.

"I'll get you something to change into." Steve pushed his chair out and stood up. Out of the corner of his eye he caught her flinching when he moved. "I'm not going to hurt you, okay?" he said. "Just getting some clothes."

He waited for her to respond before moving. She let out a small sigh, grabbed her backpack, and got to her feet. The top of her head didn't quite come close to reaching his chin. While she was a bit intimidating she was less threatening when she stood next to him. She kept a few inches of distance between them as they walked up the stairs and down the hall towards his bedroom. They were both still dripping wet from the rain water so he figured they'd both have to change. Her boots squished on the carpet lightly as they walked and he hoped they wouldn't leave a mark he'd have to explain to his mother.

Once they were in his room he dug through his dresser for an older pair of sweats that wouldn't hang off of her too much. In his peripheral vision he could see her looking at the photos he had hung up on his wall. Just as he pulled out a t-shirt she pulled a shot of him and the basketball team off the wall.

"What sport is this?" she asked.

"Basketball."

Charlie nodded and put it back up. From what he knew about Eleven it was easy to see that there was a lot about the outside world that she didn't know or understand. Steve was beginning to wonder if the



same could be said for Charlie. He handed her the clothes. "There's a bathroom down the hall that we passed. You can change in there. And you can leave your stuff here if you want."

"No thanks." She replied flatly as she took the clothes from him. Charlie stopped in the doorway and added, without turning to look at him, "Thanks." Before Steve got the chance to reply she disappeared into the hallway. He could hear her footsteps fading away.

He quickly changed out of his clothes and tossed them in the hamper before putting on new ones. While he waited for Charlie to get back he debated calling someone and telling them. But who would he call? Hopper? Nancy? Dustin? What were they going to do at 10:30 pm? He figured his best option would be to convince Charlie to meet Hopper and Eleven and drive her to the cabin the next day. In the meantime he just had to make her comfortable enough to make her want to stay. She could easily disappear in the middle of the night.

When she came back in her boots were in her hand and her jacket was sticking out of her backpack. Without wearing the hood he could see her jet black hair just reaching her shoulders. The shirt he'd given her hung loosely off her shoulders and she had the ankles of the sweats rolled up. She would have looked like a little kid if her face wasn't so intense.

Charlie dropped her bag down on the floor. "Who's Hopper?" she asked

Steve's brows pulled together. How the hell did she know about Hopper? He knew for a fact that he hadn't mentioned him to her. The only person he'd told her about was Eleven. His gaze drifted down to her hand which had a small smear of blood that hadn't been there when she left. "Did you... *read my mind?*"

One of her eyebrows raised up and disappeared under her bangs. "Who's Hopper?" she asked once again.

He sighed. Steve knew he'd have to be careful with what he said to her since she could read his mind. "Eleven lives with him. He takes care of her. He's going to adopt her."

Charlie narrowed her eyes at him slightly. "Really?"

"Really."

She leaned against his desk and crossed her arms across her chest. Charlie was pretty, in an intimidating sort of way. The second the thought entered his mind he watched her carefully to see if she had heard. But her eyes were scanning his room and she seemed pretty oblivious. When she finally met his eyes again she shifted slightly. "So, you think I'm gonna disappear in the middle of the night?"

Steve put his hands in the pockets of his sweatpants. "I don't know." He admitted. "Maybe. Will you?"

Charlie stared at him while she seemed to think about her response. He wished he could read her mind. Her face was a blank canvas that was impossible to read. Her expression had yet to budge since she entered the house. He wondered if she would look less intense if she smiled. "I don't know." She said after a few silent moments passed. "I mean, it's not like I have anywhere else to be. But..." her voice trailed off.

"But?"

She sighed shortly. "People who help me get hurt, okay?" she said. Steve wasn't sure if he was imagining it or not but she seemed uncomfortable all of a sudden. "I'm sure you're a nice kid and everything, so if I leave don't take it personally."

Steve smirked. "Did you call me kid?" he asked. "We're, like, the same age."

"Whatever." Charlie said. "You gonna call one of your friends and tell them about me?"

He shrugged. "Is that alright."

"Who are you going to call?"

He hesitated. Who was he going to call? Dustin? Nancy? Hopper? Hopper seemed like the best choice but he still wasn't sure. Still, he figured it was at least worth a shot. "Hopper." He finally answered.

"Who Eleven is staying with."

Charlie stared at him, standing so still he wondered if she was even breathing. She only moved when another drop of blood leaked from her nose to wipe it away. "Fine." She said. "As long as you're not calling the cops."

Oops.

He sat down on his bed and picked up the phone from his nightstand. As he dialed the number he kept one eye on her in his peripheral vision. While the line rang she turned back around to look at the photos on his wall. Hoppers unmistakable voicemail message came from the other line. "It's Hop. You know what to do."

Steve cleared his throat quietly. "Yeah, Hopper, it's Steve. I have, uh, kind of a situation." He chose his words carefully since Charlie was in the room. "This girl was outside my house and she's... well, she's like Eleven. Call me back as soon as you get this, okay?" Steve set the receiver down before getting up and walking over to stand next to her. He followed her gaze to a picture of him and Nancy, one of the few he had kept up.

"She your girlfriend?" Charlie asked.

"She used to be." Steve looked down at her. "What made you come back to Hawkins?" from what Mike and Hopper had told him about Eleven's experience in the lab he would never want to come back after going through something like that.

She shrugged her shoulders, eyes still fixed on the photos. "I had a dream a little while ago about the lab. It had been bugging me." She snuck a quick glance at him. "I probably will leave soon, you know." She told him. "The longer I stay the more time I give them to catch me."

Steve raised an eyebrow and turned to face her. "You don't know?"

Charlie turned her head just slightly in his direction. "Know what?"

"The lab got shut down." He opened up one of the drawers of his desk and rummaged around for the newspaper article he had saved. Why

he saved it in the first place he wasn't sure. But it had finally come in handy. When he finally found it he handed it to her. "It got closed down like a month ago. There was a bit of an... incident."

She took it from him hesitantly. "Incident."

"A lot of people died there."

Her head snapped up. "*What?*"

"I can tell you later."

Charlie eyes him for a moment before looking down at the paper. She stared at it, silent and motionless, for so long he briefly wondered if she could read. As far as he knew Eleven couldn't read. Before he could wonder too much she set the paper down on his desk again. "What happened?"

As reluctant as he was to tell the story he figured she of all people deserved to know what happened. "There was a gate that opened to some other dimension. This monster came out and took two people back with it. It also killed a bunch of people from the lab. A bunch of new people started working there and it was different than what it used to be. But the gate opened again more monsters came out and killed pretty much everyone in the building."

Her eyes were still fixed on the paper and her eyebrows were pulled together in the middle of her forehead. It was such an outrageous story he wouldn't blame her if she didn't believe him right away. She looked back up at him. "What happened to the other experiments?"

*Oh shit.*

He hadn't even thought about what had happened to the others. Since there was Eleven there had to be at least 10 others. Clearly some of them had escaped, but what about the ones that hadn't? Steve didn't think he had the heart to tell her he had no clue so instead he answered "Hopper would know better than me. We can ask him about it tomorrow."

Charlie nodded a few times. "Yeah, okay." She quickly brushed her hair away from her eyes. Her hair was damp from her hood that had

been soaked through with rain water. "Who else knows about Eleven?"

"Kind of a lot of people." He said before picking up a picture of the kids off the wall. Steve pointed his finger at Will. "This kid went missing. His friends found where when they went to go looking for him. His older brother and his mom and *his* older sister know too." He moved his finger to Mike. "He and Eleven are kind of dating."

She stared at the picture. "How long has she been out?"

Steve thought for a moment. "About a year. Will went missing last November and that's when they found her. I don't know how long she was out before they did." He stuck the picture back up on the wall. "Is there anything else you need?" Charlie shook her head. "No, I'm just tired."

"Okay." Steve said. "Well, you can take my bed."

She raised an eyebrow at him. "Where are you going to sleep?"

His cheeks turned pink at the possible suggestion that she thought he would share a bed with her. "I'll get a sleeping bag and sleep on the floor." He told her. "It's not like I sleep well anyway."

She eyed him for a second, her black eyebrows inching towards one another, before she turned and walked over to the bed and sat down on the edge. "Do you have nightmares or something?" Charlie asked, crossing her legs underneath her. "Are you going to wake me up screaming at 2 AM?"

"Um, no, I just don't really sleep." Steve answered. "At all."

Charlie kept her gaze fixed on him a little longer. Her eyes were icy cold and bid enough to make her look doll like. She was short and petite yet something about her was incredibly unnerving. Even when she wasn't reading his mind he felt like she was looking right through him. It wasn't until she looked away again and moved to get under the blankets that he realized he'd been holding his breath. She leaned back against the pillows and pulled the blankets up to her waist.

"I'm really not going to run away in the middle of the night." She told

him. "Not tonight."

Steve shifted uncomfortably, not quite sure how to respond. "Do you need anything else?" Charlie simply shook her head. "Okay, well, I'm going to take a shower. If you need anything just knock on the door and shout."

He watched her in his peripheral vision while he dug through his dresser for a change of clothes before heading down the hall. The hot water of the shower burned his skin at first but he eventually got used to it. He usually took showers as the opportunity to clear his head but images flashed through his mind nonstop. The scared expression on her face when she spotted him, how difficult it had been to convince her to come inside, how totally shut down she was. She was intense in a similar way that Eleven was, yet so much more.

When he got out, dried off, and got dressed he headed back down the hall towards his room. Charlie was still propped up on the pillows behind her but her head was lolled to the side and her eyes were shut. Like she had fallen asleep by accident. Steve grabbed one of the pillows she wasn't leaning on too much and threw blanket on top of his comforter before laying down on the floor.

He stared up at the ceiling and listened to the soft sound of her breathing. Though he tried to stop himself he wondered when the last time she'd gotten a good night's sleep in a bed had been. Days? Weeks? *Months*? He didn't want to think about it. After going through what she had, if her experience had been anything like Eleven's, he figured she at least deserved to have a consistent food supply and a place to sleep. As he drifted off to sleep he tried to ignore the memory of news reports he had seen about how dangerous it was to live on the street and did his best not to imagine someone with such a tough shield being so scared.

### 3. Meeting the Hoppers

I've given up on proofreading things before I upload them. If I proofread it'll never go up and I've accepted it. Enjoy this update anyway!

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A nightmare jolted Steve awake and sent him sitting upright. A sharp pain shot up his back and his hand instantly reached around him to grab the source. For a brief second he wondered why he was sleeping on the floor. When he looked over at his empty bed and the messy blankets on top of it his memories from the night before came crashing over him like a tidal wave. Panic started pumping through his veins at Charlie's absence. Had she snuck out in the middle of the night after all?

Steve jumped to his feet and darted down the hall. The bathroom door and his parents' bedroom were both open and void of petite mind-readers. He hurried down the stairs and surveyed the living room and dining room, both empty, before going into the kitchen. Steve stopped in the doorway when he spotted her standing in front of the open refrigerator with her back to him.

She pulled out the container of orange juice before turning to face him. Her hair was tied up and into a pony tail and there was a red mark on her cheek from sleeping, sleep still clouding her eyes. The sleeves of his shirt hung past her hands, making her look even younger than she was. She was, dare he say, cute.

One of Charlie's eyebrows disappeared under her bangs. "Think I ran away?" she asked.

"I, uh... yeah." He admitted.

The corner of her lips twitched upwards a fraction. Just enough for him to notice before her expression once again turned stoic. "My backpack is still upstairs. Did you think I left without it?"

"I didn't notice it." Steve said. He pushed his hair out of his forehead and met her on the other side of the room, digging through the

refrigerator. "Are you hungry?" he glanced at her just in time to see her shrug. "It's okay to say you are."

She hesitated, her eyes flickering over to the contents of the fridge before meeting his again. "Okay."

Steve pulled a box of frozen waffles out of the fridge and popped four of them into the toaster oven before grabbing two glasses from the cabinet and putting them in front of her. Charlie poured orange juice into them and brought the second one up to her lips but hesitated to drink it. It wasn't until he took a sip of his own that she copied. How could something so simple have the power to be so heart breaking? "Do you think I'm going to try and poison you or something? That I'm going to kill you?"

Charlie stared at him over the rim of her glass. It was ironic that she was able to read everyone she came across yet she herself was so unreadable. "I think everyone's trying to kill me." She answered flatly.

He felt his mouth hang open but no words came out until he practically had to spit them out. "Is that a joke?" Steve asked

She held his gaze for a few moments longer before taking a sip from her glass. "Sort of." She said, setting it down on the counter. "A truth-based one."

"But the lab shut down, right?" Steve said, in hopes of being helpful. He watched her eyes move out the window above the sink behind him. "So you don't have to worry about having to hide from it anymore. Right?"

Charlie shrugged, carefully watching something outside. "The people who worked there are still out there somewhere. They didn't just vanish." She said. Her eyes suddenly met his again and in a moment the tension that had settled over her seemed to soften somewhat. "It does help that the actual building is shut down though."

Steve watched her bring the cup back up to her lips and take another sip, all the while trying his best to get inside her mind. Eleven didn't talk about the lab much, at least not to him, and the effect it had on her to that day. He imagined that it wasn't easy. But she didn't seem



nearly as worried about the people at the lab as Charlie did. Maybe it was because she had a support system. Steve figured that someone living on the street didn't have many people they could be close to.

Before Steve could worry much about what to say next the phone behind him started to ring. He watched Charlie's eyes go wide before she sat upright, suddenly looking tense. Her gaze followed him as he stood up and walked over to the phone behind him. Out of all his guesses of who might be calling (Hopper, Dustin, his mom) he hoped it was Hopper. Steve picked up the receiver and glanced at Charlie, who looked slightly less alarmed, before speaking. "Hello?"

"Steve?" Hopper's voice was unmistakable even over the phone. "Your message better be a prank, kid."

"It's not." He replied, leaning on the wall. His eyes were locked with Charlie's across the room as he talked. A small part of him was still afraid that if he dared to look away from her for too long she would disappear. "Not quite my sense of humor."

"Tell me everything."

Steve let out a quiet sigh, silently hoping it wouldn't make her feel weird to be talking about her in front of her. "I heard something outside last night, so I went out and it was this girl. I saw the number on her arm so I brought her inside. Her name's Charlie."

"And she can do things?"

"Yeah." Steve scratched the back of his head. "Can we come over? Try and figure things out? Maybe she can meet Eleven?"

Hopper's voice dropped a little and he could hear him ask "You wanna meet her?" before addressing Steve again. "When can you come?"

"We can leave in a few."

"Alright then."

Steve hung the phone back up on the receiver and walked back over to the table, taking his seat once more. For what felt like the

hundredth time already he tried to read something in her expression. Either she was a sociopath or had an incredible poker face. "You okay to meet them today?"

Charlie held onto her glass with both hands, her gaze dropping down to the juice inside. Instead of replying she simply shrugged her shoulders.

"You can tell me if you're not, you know." He said.

She remained silent and as still as a statue. Steve could only begin to imagine how scary the world was to someone who had such a negative experience with it. He hardly knew anything about her but Steve found himself desperately curious to learn everything about her she would let him. All of a sudden she pushed her chair back and got to her feet, heading out of the kitchen. "Let's get this over with." She said flatly.

Steve quickly jumped up and followed her, grabbing his keys off the keyring and yanking the front door open. When they reached his car Charlie stood stiffly a few feet away while he got in no problem. He rolled the passenger window down and leaned over so he could see her. "It's fine." He told her. "I promise I have practice."

Charlie stayed put for a few more seconds before inching towards the car and lowering herself in. "I don't like cars." She mumbled as she clicked her seatbelt into place.

"Why not?" he asked her.

In his peripheral vision he could see her knuckles go white when the engine started and he backed out of the driveway. "They don't feel safe."

Steve tried not to smile. She was less intense when she was nervous. "I'll go slow."

As he drove to Hopper's cabin he tried to see Hawkins through the eyes of someone who had likely avoided it their whole life. The streets were full of memories, mostly positive for him. Had Charlie been near Main Street when she escaped? Who was the first person

she had interacted with in the outside world?

Charlie was silent for more than half the ride. They were only a few minutes away from where they had to start walking when she finally spoke up. "You think too loud."

"Excuse me?"

"I can hear you without trying to." She explained, sitting low in the seat with her arms crossed on her chest. "And it sucks."

Steve spared a glance at her before looking back at the road. "What sucks?" he asked.

"Being here again." Charlie looked away from the view out the window to face him. Her gaze was so intense and heavy that he felt small and transparent when she looked at him. "It brings me back to things I don't wanna go back to."

He had to stop himself from saying he understood. There was no way he ever would. "Seems like the kind of thing that would suck."

"So does living in the same town forever." She said.

Steve looked over just in time to see a microscopic smile drop back into her neutral expression. "Was that a joke?"

"No." she said defensively.

"You can make jokes you know." Steve told her, since she seemed to be convinced otherwise. "What, are you scared of being funny?"

Charlie turned to look out the window once more. "You could say that."

Steve parked the car in the same spot he always did when he drove the kids to see Eleven, or the few times he had to baby sit when Hopper had to work late. The remains of the melted snow from the storm a week back sat in large mounds every couple of feet away from each other. When they got out of the car Charlie wrapped her arms around herself and waked closer to Steve than he expected her to.

"Are you cold?"

"No."

It was a bad lie.

The walk from the car to the cabin seemed a lot longer walking next to Charlie. He tried not to worry too much about how the meeting would go since he apparently thought too loud. But her comment about him not calling the police the night before made him anxious about what would happen when she met him.

And what about Eleven? He didn't even want to let his mind go there.

When the cabin came into view he glanced over at Charlie, who was just as unreadable as ever. "You okay?" he asked.

"Fine." She answered shortly.

Steve walked up the creaky steps and knocked on the door three times. From the other side he could hear some movement heading towards them. He half expected Charlie to turn and disappear into the trees. But she only stood stiffly by his side, her eyes looking somewhere far away. Steve heard all the locks from the other side of the door before it opened and Hopper stood in its place.

His eyes instantly looked at Charlie before he waved them inside. Her movements were stiff as she followed Steve inside the cabin. Compared to the distance she had kept between them the night before she was practically holding his hand. Steve exchanged a glance with Hopper as she looked around the room.

The silence in the room was thick and awkward, and Steve was thankful that Hopper was the one to break it. "So, um, Charlie right?"

"Yeah."

Steve watched Hopper cringe slightly at her response. "Where's Eleven?" he asked in hopes of easing some of the tension.

"She's in the shower." He answered, nodding down the short hallway where the bathroom was. "She's pretty excited about this." Hopper

looked at Charlie, who was inspecting the police radio on the other side of the room. "You wanna sit down?"

It took Charlie a second to realize he was talking to her. She straightened up and quickly sat in the chair so she could sit by herself. Steve and Hopper lowered onto the couch, both of them watching her carefully. He wondered if Hopper felt the same sense of intimidation he had the first time he met her.

This time Steve took it upon himself to break the silence. "Last night Charlie asked me what had happened to the other experiments when the lab shut down. Do you know what happened?"

Hopper shifted slightly on his half of the couch. "I tried to find out, but everyone who worked there kind of went underground. All I know is that they're not in the building anymore."

Steve was pretty sure he saw disappointment flash across her face. "That's not a lot." She said quietly.

"I'm still trying." Hopper continued. "I even got a search warrant for some areas of the building, but I didn't find anything."

Charlie's dark eyebrows met in the middle of her forehead. "Search warrant?" she asked.

"Yeah. It's basically something that gives the police permission to look through something."

Steve felt his stomach sink all the way down to his feet. It seemed he should have acted on his plans to warn Hopper about what he assumed were her negative feelings about cops sooner. He watched Charlie carefully as her eyes wandered to Hopper's jacket hanging up on a hook next to the door. Her eyes went wide and she jumped to her feet when she saw the police badge.

He expected her to get cross with him or yell. She instead bolted for the front door as fast as she could. Steve was up and after her before she even jumped down the porch stairs. For someone with such small legs she sure as hell ran fast. Charlie had the advantage of having practice running for her life. Steve had the advantage of running laps

multiple times a week. It didn't take him long to figure out that she was a short distance runner.

She started to slow down a little less than a kilometer away from the cabin. It wasn't until she tripped over a log and almost fell that Steve managed to get close to her. He grabbed the back of her shirt and yanked her towards him, securing his arms around her small waist before she could get away.

"Get off me!" she screamed, flailing her arms in attempt to get away from him. "Get off!"

Her piercing voice was almost enough to make him consider letting her go. Her regular speaking voice was lower than most girls he knew yet her scream was straight out of a horror movie. "Just calm down." He told her in between screams.

"You lied to me!" she yelled, this time banging her fists against his arm. "You're a liar!"

"Would you just stop for a second?!"

Instead of replying Charlie swung her fist behind her in attempt to punch him in the face.

Though she continued to struggle for what felt like forever she quickly stopped screaming. Steve figured that she'd eventually wear herself out and that he just had to make sure she didn't escape his grip. It just took a lot longer than he expected. When she settled for trying to squirm away from him instead of hitting him he figured she was calm enough to talk to. "Hopper's different from other cops, okay? You can trust him."

"Bullshit." She spat. "They're all the same."

"What do you think is gonna happen? He's gonna turn you in?" Steve asked. "Eleven's lived with him for over a year and he's never turned her in. Most of the time no one even knew she was there. Not even her best friends."

Charlie scoffed. "Then he's a good actor."

Steve hoped she would pull herself together and listen to him soon. His arms were getting tired of holding onto her so tightly. "You know, if I was going to turn you in I would have brought you were. I would have gone to the police station or a news broadcaster."

For a moment she stopped struggling, likely thinking over what he said. "Then why did you bring me here?" she asked eventually.

"To ask him what to do."

Charlie turned towards him as much as she could. "If you don't know what to do with me then just let me leave."

"No."

She let out a short sigh and started pushing against his arms again. "Fine." She said. "Let's get this over with."

Steve let his arms drop but quickly grabbed onto her arm just in case she was still planning on running. He hadn't realized how far they had ran until they started walking back. Charlie once again went stiff by his side but didn't try and escape once in the long walk back. Steve tried to imagine what it was like to be her. What had happened to her that she was so scared of everything? He imagined that the quality of life for someone who was so scared all the time wasn't as high as it was for everyone else.

"I got arrested once." Charlie said suddenly. When he looked over at her she had a small drop of blood inching out of her nose. "It wasn't a fun experience."

"What happened?"

She wiped her nose with her hand and her hand on her borrowed sweats. "He did things I didn't like." She replied shortly.

"Like what?"

Charlie shook her head instead of replying out loud.

It took almost ten minutes for the cabin to come into sight again. He could see Hopper and Eleven sitting on the bench on the front porch

talking, neither of them noticing Steve and Charlie coming back. He glanced over at her, doing his best to read her expression but coming up short as always. "You okay?" he asked her when he couldn't figure her mood out.

"Yeah." She answered quietly. "Fine."

As they stepped over the trip wire Steve kept his fingers crossed that things would go better the second time around.



## 4. Getting to Know You ft the Hoppers

wow it's been forever since I updated this. but I have things planned for this story so no need to fear! there will be more :) this chapter is shitty but I hope you enjoy anyway

---

Eleven sat on the porch next to Hopper with her knees pressed against her chest and her eyes wide as she watched Steve and Charlie come up the front steps. A thickness settled in the air around them and made him feel as if he might suffocate. He glanced over at Charlie whose gaze was fixed on Eleven. For two people who came from the same background they couldn't have been more different. Though Eleven could be tough when she wanted to she was, most of the time, soft spoken and kind. She laughed loudly at jokes on the television and smiled brightly when Steve snuck her sweets on the nights he babysat for her.

The sound of the bench creaking as Hopper shifted slightly broke some of the tension. "Look," he started, "I know that some cops aren't always so... understanding. But I promise I'm on your side here."

Charlie had long since given up trying to escape Steve's grip and settled for standing a few inches away from him. "I'm just supposed to believe you?" she asked.

Hopper glanced at Steve, a silent question if she was always so difficult. "I'm not sure how I'm supposed to prove it to you." He admitted.

Steve tugged gently on Charlie's arm to get her attention. "Even if we wanted to turn you into the lab there's no one to go to. A bunch of the people who work there are dead now, and the ones who survived haven't been seen in a year."

"Papa is dead." Eleven chimed in quietly, her arms still wrapped around her legs.

Steve wasn't sure who *Papa* was or what his significance was it seemed to have some importance to Charlie. He felt her go tense

before she took a microscopic step towards him. "What happened?"

"The monster." Eleven answered. "I saw it."

He watched Charlie's unmoving expression carefully, waiting for any sign of a reaction. She reached up to wipe away a drop of blood he noticed only a moment before, a crease suddenly settling in her forehead. He wished the roles were reversed and that he was able to read what was going through her mind. Based off of the conversation he assumed the man they were talking about was someone from the lab who was some sort of messed up father figure to them.

Hopper let out a quiet grunt before pushing himself to his feet. "Why don't we go inside, huh?" he suggested before nudging Eleven's arm and heading for the door.

Eleven followed him inside but Charlie didn't budge. Steve waited until the door shut behind the small girl before letting go of Charlie's arm and turning towards her. "What's up?" he asked, unsure of what exactly he sensed in her mood but knowing there was something there.

Her blue eyes were fixed on the door behind him. "I don't know." She said before she looked at him. Everything inside him stopped pumping for a moment when she looked at him. Steve remembered a time when a simple glance from Nancy had the power to make his insides halt. Though Charlie felt much different. "This is weird."

"Maybe a little." Steve admitted. It wasn't quite as weird as fighting monsters with a group of middle schoolers, including his ex-girlfriends little brother, but it was a bit strange. "But so what?"

She rubbed her hands together in what he guessed was, dare he say, a nervous tic. If nothing else came from the meeting he would at least be able to say that some of her wall came down. "I don't like talking about the lab." She said, her voice quieter than before.

"Do you ever talk about it?" She shook her head. "Well you have to talk about it a little bit."

"Why?"

Steve leaned against the railing of the porch, trying to think of the best way to explain it to someone who had never seen day time therapy talk shows when home sick from school. "It's healthy to talk about upsetting things because it makes them less upsetting." He said.

She made a face at him. "That doesn't make any sense." She said, crossing her arms under her chest.

"Not really." He agreed. "But it works." She glanced back at the front door to the cabin, slight hints of nervousness written across her face when she looked at him again. "What are you worried about? That we're going to turn you in?" she nodded a few times. "Okay, how about this? If Hopper turns you in I'll help you escape and then you have my permission to kick my ass."

The corners of her lips twitched upwards. "You sure you can get me out all by yourself?"

"I'll recruit everyone I know."

They twitched upwards a little more. "Alright fine."

Steve pushed himself off the railing and lightly pushed her towards the front door.

Eleven was sitting in the arm chair and Hopper had pulled over one of the chairs from the kitchen table, leaving the couch open for Steve and Charlie. She sat closer than him than he expected her to and pressed her hands together between her thighs, her eyes fixed on the carpet. Another silence, not quite as tense or heavy as the one before, took over the room. Steve's leg bounced up and down, a nervous habit he had adopted ever since his first face off with a Demogorgon in the week that Will Byers had been missing. Even thinking about that night made flashes of unpleasant memories devour his mind. It wasn't until Hopper spoke that he was able to blink them away.

"How long have you been out of... there?" he asked, leaning back against the chair.

Charlie's small shoulders shrugged. "Time is messy." She said softly. "I don't really understand it." She tilted her head up but kept her eyes in

the same spot. "I remember seeing something on TV a little while after I got out about that singer with the glasses that got shot outside his house."

"John Lennon?" Steve asked, remembering the day clearly by how much his mom had cried while the news reports on the scene played on the screen. "From the Beatles?"

"Yeah, they said something about a bug."

Steve suppressed the urge to smile and was only successful in doing so because of how seriously she said it. "That was five years ago."

"How did you get out?" Eleven asked, leaning forward in her seat and voicing the question that had been on Steve's mind. He'd never had the courage to ask.

Charlie moved in her seat, clearly uncomfortable. "I think it was Christmas Day because a lot of people who worked there weren't there that day. Papa wasn't there. I can... make people think things and do things. So when a guy came in to bring me dinner I made him leave his keys. And I just... ran."

Eleven's eyes were wider than before, her mouth hanging open slightly. "Where did you go?"

"I found someone's clothes hanging outside and got on a bus." Charlie explained. "I fell asleep and got off in Pittsburgh."

"That's a 6 hour bus ride." Hopper pointed out.

Charlie shrugged her shoulders, her arm brushing against Steve's. "I took a nap."

A snicker escaped his throat that he quickly tried to cover up with a cough. If he didn't know better he would have thought that Charlie had actually cracked a smile. Hopper, on the other hand, was still dead serious. "So where are you gonna stay?"

"My parents are out of town until the week after New Years." Steve offered.

"Yeah but what about after that?"

Charlie cut in before he could reply. "Look, don't take this the wrong way or anything" she said, "but I never really stay in the same place for very long. Your parents get home in three weeks. I might not even be here by then."

Steve did his best to ignore the way his heart sank slightly with disappointment. "But the lab is shut down. You don't have to run from them anymore. Without the lab the people who worked there don't have any power over you."

She studied him, her eyes darting across her face. He anticipated the blood to trickle out of her nose as she read his mind but it never came. She looked away from him, her gaze falling down to a spot on the wooden floor. "I don't know."

"The lab is shut down, you know." Hopper said. "It has been for almost two months."

"Why?" she asked. "What happened."

Steve, Hopper, and Eleven all shared a glance before diving into a story that would take almost an hour to tell. Hopper did most of the talking, Eleven chiming in every once in a while with something he forgot to add. Steve had been in the dark about mostly everything that happened until the end so the only thing he had to offer in the story was his two fights with Demogorgons and going into the Upside Down with the kids. Charlie listened with wide eyes and an open mouth. She would occasionally glance at Steve as if to make sure everything she was hearing was true.

Once the story ended with Eleven closing the gate a heavy silence fell over the room. Steve hardly ever talked about what happened with anyone. He didn't want to burden the kids with how badly he was dealing with it and he didn't have the heart to talk about it with Nancy and Johnathan. Images of the Upside Down and Demogorgons flashed through his mind while Charlie took in everything they'd told her.

"Does Will still have those now-memories?" she asked after a few

moments had passed and her mind seemed to wrap around everything she'd been told.

"Not that I know of." Hopper said. "But he likes to downplay things sometimes. Thinks he's gonna worry us."

Charlie nodded a few times before turning her attention towards Eleven. "And you really think everyone from the lab is dead? *Everyone?*"

Eleven shifted in her seat, visibly uncomfortable. She purposely avoided looking at Hopper, who was watching her carefully. "Yes." She eventually said. "They can't hurt us anymore."

Charlie responded with a grunt of disapproval.

They didn't stay long. He could see Charlie growing increasingly uncomfortable until he suggested they go back to his house and get something to eat for lunch, which she eagerly agreed to. Before they left Eleven asked hopefully if she would see her again and Charlie assured her she would. She kept her arms wrapped around herself and remained silent the entire walk to the car. Steve didn't attempt to strike up a conversation. She'd experienced information overload, not to mention that she'd met someone else that had grown up in the lab for the first time.

When they finally reached his car and he started up the engine he spoke up, watching her out of the corner of his eye as he navigated the narrow trail. "Why do you think the people from the lab are still alive?"

She looked away from the view out the window, her legs crossed underneath her and her hands in her lap. His clothes practically swallowed her petite frame. "If you knew what those people were like you would understand why."

"Then enlighten me."

Charlie sighed and sunk down in the seat. He was prepared to let the topic drop, remembering how she said she almost never talked about the lab. But she surprised him by continuing. "They're willing to do

anything 'for the good of the nation'. But they're actually just monsters." She closed her eyes and leaned her head back against the seat. "We were locked in our rooms all day when they weren't experimenting on us. And we'd get in trouble if we ever said no."

A sick feeling was setting in his stomach. He hardly knew anything about life inside the Hawkins lab. Eleven never talked about it and anyone else who knew never brought it up. He'd always known it couldn't have been good but he never knew the details. "What would happen if you said no?"

"One time I wouldn't leave my room because I didn't want to do work. These two guys came in and dragged me into a cell with no lights or furniture. I was only given one meal a day instead of two and they would just kind of throw it at me when they came in."

"Jesus."

"I left a little while after that." She looked out the window again. "They have their orders from higher ups, which I overheard them talking about a few times. They'd do anything to get their little Guinees as powerful as possible, and even more to keep us contained. *That's* why I don't believe they're dead. They wouldn't go down without a fight when they have so much work to do."

Steve thought over what she said, doing his best to not imagine a younger Charlie being locked in a room alone and scared. "So then where do you think they are?" he asked her.

She shrugged, the neck of her borrowed pullover falling down on her neck. "They have allies in high places. It wouldn't be hard for them to get help with hiding."

The image of her terrified face the night before when they'd met flashed through his mind. The fear in her eyes in that moment alone was a giveaway of just what the people she was hiding from were capable of. Charlie turned on the radio, a silent way of saying she was done talking, and the only sound for the rest of the car ride was Bondie songs.

## 5. Opening Up

"So what you're telling me is you got your ass kicked?"

"What I'm telling you is that I was caught off guard."

Steve sat across from Charlie at the kitchen table recounting some of the less important details of the story she'd heard at Hopper's cabin. Like giving Dustin girl advice and getting into a fight with Billy Hargrove. Though he wasn't exactly a skilled cook, boiling pasta and heating up tomato sauce being the extent of his abilities, Charlie seemed perfectly content with her meal. They were still sat at the table long after they finished eating, the sun outside well below the horizon. The longer they sat the more she began to open up. She tried her best to hide a smile as he told her about the fight but she failed miserably. The closer she was to smiling the more determined he was to make her laugh.

"So how did the fight end, then?" she asked.

"Basically Max, you remember her?" Charlie nodded, "She took one of the syringes that we used to knock Will out and stabbed him in the neck with it. He passed out on the floor and we basically stole his car for a couple hours."

Her smile grew too wide for her to hide it. Some of her intensity was lost when she smiled. Her eyes were less cold and everything about her was brighter. He dared to let him think that she was pretty. "That's crazy."

"What? You've never stolen a car before?" he asked sarcastically.

"I don't even know how to drive." She said before shifting in her chair and leaning over the table slightly. "Have you gotten in any other fights?"

"Yeah." He admitted, "But that one's not as fun of a story."

"Tell me."

Steve sighed and rested his elbows on the table. "My friend Nancy



and I used to date. You saw the picture of her in my room. While Will was missing I thought she had cheated on me so I did something really stupid because I was upset. She was with Johnathan, who she's dating now, when it happened. He and I got in a fight because I thought she had cheated on me with him so I said some really mean stuff to him."

"Did you get your ass kicked then too?"

He rolled his eyes at her. "Not that bad."

Her gaze searched his face for a few moments before a small drop of blood trickled out of her nose. "Liar."

Steve felt his cheeks go warm. She had relaxed enough that it was easy to forget how scared she had been the day before, and why. "Yeah, whatever." He grumbled, leaning back in his seat.

"You're not mad at her?" Charlie asked him, her smile falling a bit. "After everything she said to you?"

He suddenly regretted telling her about what had happened between him and Nancy on Halloween, feeling embarrassed. "No, not really." He admitted. "She was only so harsh because she was drunk. If we'd both been sober she would have been a lot nicer. She's never usually mean."

Charlie didn't look convinced. "She still shouldn't have said that to you."

Steve's face felt warm and he quickly reached for his water. "We all say things we don't mean."

She shrugged her shoulders. Before she got the chance to speak again the phone on the wall behind her started ringing. Charlie jumped in her seat, whipping around to stare at the phone. He hurried to pick it up so the sound wouldn't continue. "Hello?"

"You didn't think to tell me you found a girl in your backyard and that she's living with you?"

"Hello to you too Nancy." He watched Charlie turn her back to him,

something in her face he couldn't read. "It wasn't like I was never gonna tell you."

"I sure hope not." She said. "Mike just told me. Eleven told him."

"Of course she did."

"What's she like?"

Steve had never been a fan of talking about people in front of them. Especially when that person was someone as intimidating and cold as Charlie could be. "I don't know."

"She's right there isn't she?"

"Yep."

"Can we meet her?"

He glanced over at Charlie across the room. Meeting Hopper and Eleven hadn't gone over horribly, but it certainly hadn't been perfect. Would meeting Nancy and Johnathan, who was the other person in 'we', be too much for her? "Um... I don't know. I can ask her." He said, lowering the phone and putting his hand over the speaker. "Charlie?" She turned around in her chair to face him. "Would you be okay with meeting Nancy and Johnathan?"

She narrowed her eyes at him. "Your ex girlfriend and the one who beat you up?" she asked.

Steve cracked a small smile. "They're my friends. They want to meet you." He watched her think it over, her blue eyes falling to the floor. "You don't have to if you don't want to."

Charlie looked back up at him, her lips slightly pursed. "Where?"

"They can come here if you want." He said. Steve figured another trip to someplace unfamiliar might not be good for her.

"And you would be here?"

He felt something in him grow warm at the fact that she was

comfortable enough that she wanted him there. "Yeah, I'll be here the whole time."

She mulled the idea over for a little bit longer before nodding her head. "Okay."

Steve held the phone back up to his head. "She said okay." He told her. "Do you guys wanna come over tomorrow?"

"Yeah sure, we'll come over around noon." Nancy said. "Is she cute?"

A choking noise escaped her throat. "What?"

From the other line he heard Nancy laughing. "I asked if she was cute. You're talking about her in *the way*?"

Steve scoffed at her. "What way?"

"Like you're only half paying attention to me because you're staring at her."

He moved his eyes to look at the floor since he was indeed looking at Charlie. "Whatever Nance. I'll see you tomorrow."

"Don' forget to give her a goodnight kiss."

Steve rolled his eyes and hung up the phone before going back to the table and taking their empty plates and setting them in the sink. When he turned back to face her she was covering her mouth while she yawned. "Are you tired?"

"No."

"Liar."

A small smile made its way on her face. "Fine." She said, standing up. "Can I shower?"

"Yeah of course." She followed him upstairs and stood in the doorway while he grabbed a change of clothes for her. Steve showed her how to work the shower and got an extra set of towels from down the hall. "Just shout if you need anything."

Steve wandered back into his room and changed into more comfortable clothes. His eyes lingered on her backpack sitting on the floor next to his desk. He briefly debated doing a bit of snooping before he remembered she could easily find out and sat down on the sleeping bag he'd laid out for himself instead. From his room he could hear the water from the shower running, though the sound was heavily muffled. He thought back to everything he had learned about her from her conversation with Eleven and what she had told him on the ride back to his house. Try as he might to get the image of a younger, much more frightened Charlie locked in a room all by herself out of his mind it stayed put.

*Is she cute?* Steve hoped Nancy wouldn't say something embarrassing in front of her. Of course she was cute, in a sort of way he never anticipated being drawn to. Meeting her gaze directly made him feel paralyzed. He felt like she could see right through him, and not just because she could read his thoughts. Even when she was drenched from the rain and sitting at his kitchen table, not daring to even look at him, she was cute.

He heard the shower shut off less than ten minutes after she'd closed the door after him. The floor creaked under her feet as she made her way back into his room. Her cheeks were pink from the hot water and small drops of water dripped from her hair. "Better?" he asked once she came into the room.

"Better." She agreed, crossing the room to sit on the edge of his bed. "Why does everyone wanna meet me so bad?"

Steve turned to face her, wrapping his arms around his knees. "Well it's not every day someone who can read minds comes to town."

She raised an eyebrow at him. "You already have a telekinetic living fifteen minutes away."

"Yeah but that's not the same."

She cracked a small smile. "Whatever." Charlie moved up towards the head of the bed and pulled the covers over her after reaching over and shutting off the lamp. "Try not to talk in your sleep tonight."

His eyebrows raised high on his forehead. "I talk in my sleep?"

"No. I was kidding."

A wide smile broke out on his face and he wished he could see her. "Oh, so you're making jokes now?"

"Goodnight Steve."

xXx

Charlie spent the entire morning pretending not to be nervous while Steve spent the entire morning trying to get her to admit she was nervous. She sat on the floor in front of the television and flipped the channel every few minutes, seemingly unsatisfied with each one. She hardly ate anything for breakfast and he had a feeling she only ate as much as she did since he was pestering her the whole time. The closer it got to noon the antsier she became.

"You know I can call and cancel if you want me to." He reminded her a half hour before they were supposed to come.

"I'm fine." She said, though it didn't convince him at all.

When the doorbell rang a little past noon she straightened up and turned towards the door. Steve glanced at her, unsuccessfully trying to gauge her emotions, before getting up from the couch to answer the door. She stayed a few feet behind him down the hall and he could practically feel her nervous energy bouncing off the walls. If he had learned anything about her he knew it was better to pretend he didn't notice how nervous she was. She would only deny it if he were to bring it up.

He pulled the door open to a grinning Nancy and more subdued Johnathan standing on his doorstep. Their eyes immediately drifted behind him to Charlie, Nancy's smile only growing. Steve stepped to the side so they could come in and closed the door behind them. He watched Charlie shift her weight from one leg to the other as they approached. She was a good deal shorter than them all, but it was more than that that made her look so small.

Nancy held her hand out once she reached her. "I'm Nancy. It's really

nice to meet you."

Charlie hesitantly glanced at Steve before taking her hand, looking not quite sure what to do with it. "Charlie." She said simply. Johnathan stepped towards her once Nancy let her hand go. A small smile twitched on her face. "You're the one who kicked his ass?"

Johnathan grinned at her, "Well I don't know about that."

"I do." She said, letting her hand drop to her side again. "I saw."

Steve cut in before his face could turn any warmer. "Why don't we eat something for lunch?" he said, quickly leading them into the kitchen.

Charlie lingered next to his side as they walked through the house and Steve could practically feel Nancy's eyes staring holes into the back of his head. She sat at the table with Nancy and Johnathan while he dug through the fridge for something to eat.

"So where have you been staying before you came here?" Nancy asked, leaning her elbows on the table and watching Charlie with wide and curious eyes.

"I was in Indianapolis for the past few years. But before that I was in Pittsburg for a while."

"Did you have an apartment or something?"

He heard Charlie snort. "No. I mostly slept under a bridge in this one park. Sometimes when it was cold I would go through apartment buildings trying to find a party to sneak into so I could pretend to pass out so I could spend the night."

Steve turned and saw the confused expressions his friends wore. "So you were homeless?" Johnathan asked.

"I guess." Charlie said with a short shrug.

"For how long?"

She looked over at Steve, a silent request for him to answer for her. "Five years." He said. "She left the lab right around the Lennon

shooting."

Both Nancy and Johnathan nodded. Anyone and everyone remembered the Lennon shooting as if it had only happened one or two years ago instead of five. "So what made you come back here?" Johnathan asked her.

"I had a dream about the lab a couple nights in a row. It was bugging me. I thought I would come back and try and get some closer." She glanced at Steve. "I didn't expect it to be shut down."

Steve quickly put together four sandwiches and sat down at the table with them. He could tell Charlie was doing her best to keep the focus of the conversation off of her. She asked about school and what kind of things they did in their spare time. Johnathan told her about his photography and Nancy admitted she was thinking of going into journalism. Charlie tried a few times to ask Steve wanted to do after high school but he avoided the question just like she did every time one was directed at her. Johnathan and Nancy were very aware of his utter cluelessness on what to do with his life and helped him avoid it.

When Nancy started telling her about the Christmas party her family threw every year he practically saw a lightbulb go off above her head. "You should come." She said to Charlie. "It's pretty much just going to be us, the kids, and Hopper and Johnathan's mom. And my parents of course."

Charlie glanced at him, likely looking for an excuse to say no, and shifted in her seat when he didn't offer her one. "Maybe." She said. "I've never celebrated Christmas before. I know what it is," she quickly added, "I've just never done it before."

"Don't worry. It's not a big party or anything." Nancy assured her, "More like a hangout with food. And I bet everyone's going to want to meet you."

"What about your parents?" Johnathan asked. "They don't know about any of this. How are we supposed to explain how we know Charlie?"

Nancy shrugged her shoulders, looking at Charlie from across the table. "We can say you're a friend of Steve's."

Not so long after Steve quickly excused himself to go to the bathroom, trying to ignore the pleading look Charlie gave him silently asking him to say. He made a note to tell her once they left how good of a job she did meeting both El and Hopper and Nancy and Johnathan. Despite how visibly uncomfortable she was she was going an amazing job at contributing to the conversations.

When Steve opened the bathroom door he didn't expect to see Nancy standing in the hallway. He raised his eyebrows at her, "Were you listening to me? Weirdo."

She rolled her eyes at him and pushed off the wall. "Charlie's really cool. I knew she was cute."

"So?"

Nancy glanced down the hall towards the kitchen where Charlie and Johnathan still were. "Are you gonna ask her out or something?"

Steve scoffed. "Nance, I appreciate the enthusiasm. But I'm not asking her out."

"But you think she's cute! And I can tell you like her."

He looked down the hall. "You know she can read minds, right? Do you seriously wanna talk about this when she's around."

She raised an eyebrow at him, "Do you want me to talk about it when we get back in the kitchen."

"Absolutely not." He said instantly. Steve leaned on the wall across from her, crossing his arms. "She's not exactly emotionally available, okay? And she basically said that she's not staying in town for too long. Not to mention she almost punched me in the face yesterday when I brought her to Hopper's place."

"She was scared. Can you blame her?" She took his silence as a yes and continued. "Look, I'm not a mind reader like she is. But I know how girls act around you when they like you. She may have powers but she's still a teenage girl. And she likes you."

Steve rolled his eyes but decided to humor her. "And what makes you



think that?"

Nancy held up her hands and counted off her points on her fingers. "She's been looking at you since we walked in the house. She's terrified of us but already comfortable with you after two and a half days. I've seen her smile once since we got here and it was at the stupidest joke you've ever told. Should I go on?"

"No because none of that is proof." Steve said. "We should go back before she starts listening."

Though he had every intention of brushing off Nancy's words they were stuck in the forefront of his mind as they made their way back into the kitchen. Charlie offered him a microscopic smile when he sat back down next to her, one that made his stomach do a summersault. He could feel his cheeks turning pink and made a point to not look at Nancy for as long as possible.

## 6. Worlds Collide

yikes I've been neglecting this story so badly. sorry to anyone who's invested in it! I realized that in my mind I had this story planned out more as a film so translating it into a story has been difficult if that makes any sense. no? okay cool. I hope you enjoy this chapter anyway :)

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"Are you sure you're okay with going to the Christmas party?" Steve asked Charlie for the hundredth time ever since Nancy and Johnathan went home the day before. "I can say you got sick or something. You don't have to go."

Charlie's gaze didn't move from the television screen that played *Grease*. "I want to go." She said in between bites of popcorn. "If I change my mind I'll let you know. Now shut up."

"Okay, okay, sorry."

Steve turned back towards the screen just in time to see Rizzo put on a blonde wig and do an insulting yet accurate impression of Sandy. Charlie burst out laughing at the line about getting sick from smoking one cigarette. She managed composed herself when her cheeks started turning red at the realization that she had fully laughed in front of him. The sound was melodic and one of the happiest things he'd ever heard. An ear to ear grin suited her face much better than her blank poker face.

The more time passed the more she started opening up to him. Steve had found subtle ways of asking her about her life in between her escape and return to Hawkins. Why pancakes were her favorite food (because she went to the same diner every morning and a waitress who knew she was homeless gave her pancakes for free), what her favorite song was (Nowhere Man by the Beatles), what her favorite season was (spring because it had the most comfortable weather for living on the street). Though she was slowly letting her walls down she'd never actually laughed in front of him before.

"You're staring at me."

Steve felt his face get hot and he quickly moved his gaze back to the screen, watching Rizzo climb out of the window to hang out with the guys. "Sorry."

Bit by bit the awkwardness started to fade away once again. Out of the corner of his eye he watched her, planning ways to make her laugh again in the future. Charlie's laugh was a sound he knew he needed to hear more than just once.

It was safe to say he was falling for her.

Charlie shifted next to him, chewing on an unpopped kernel. "I hate the way it sounds. That's why I don't do it."

He looked back over at her. "What?"

"My laugh."

Steve frowned at her, reading the discomfort in her face. Either he was getting better at reading her or she was getting worse at keeping a poker face in front of him. "What are you talking about?" he asked her. "It's not ugly."

Though her eyes were still looking at the screen he could tell she wasn't actually focusing on it. "Yes it is."

"It's really not."

He waited for her to reply but she stayed quiet. Clearly she didn't believe him. He was just about to turn his attention back to the movie when he spotted a small drop of blood drip out her nose. While his cheeks turned red with embarrassment that she had likely heard how cute he thought her laugh was he offered up his sleeve. She wiped the blood off her nose with the black fabric, a small smile appearing on her face when she let go of his sweatshirt.

"Thanks." She said. He knew she was thanking him for more than just letting her wipe her blood on him.

Once the movie was over they got into the car and drove to the grocery store on the opposite side of town to get something to eat for the rest of the week. Food went a lot quicker when there was

someone else there to eat it. Charlie fiddled with the radio, with some of his help figuring out how to use it, and eventually left it on a station that played songs from the 60's. Though the grocery store was practically on the opposite side of town the drive was still short.

"What do you want for dinner tonight?" Steve asked as they headed towards the entrance. "And don't say pancakes, we had those yesterday."

He looked over at her, hands shoved in the pockets of the sweatshirt he'd let her borrow and a pout on her face. "Then I don't care."

"I'll make them tomorrow morning." Steve bargained. "But you need to eat real food."

Since Steve's cooking abilities were extremely limited they wandered over to the frozen food section. He had to lead her away from the frozen waffles over to the vegetables. She picked out a bag of peas and corn as well as a couple of meals for when Steve went back to work and wouldn't be home to make her something. He could see her struggling to hold everything so he hurried to the front of the store to get a basket.

His parents were coming home from their vacation in a little more than a week and he was already beginning to panic about where Charlie would go. He could ask Hopper if she could stay with him and Eleven, but even if they agreed he wasn't sure Charlie trusted them enough. There was a possibility he could attempt to hide her in his house the same way Mike had with Eleven. But his parents room was on the way to the bathroom down the hall. It was all just too risky. At some point he'd have to talk to her about it. But not when she was in a good mood.

When he turned the corner into the aisle that he'd left Charlie in he instantly spotted an unpleasantly familiar face standing next to her. Billy Hargrove had on a sickeningly sweet smile as he talked to Charlie. Next to him she looked even smaller than usual. It didn't help that she was practically drowning in the sweatshirt she'd borrowed that morning. As Steve hurried over to them his stomach churned at the sight of Billy's eyes running over her body.

"And how is it I've never seen your pretty face around here before?" Steve heard him ask once he got close enough.

"I don't really go out a lot." She answered flatly.

She turned and looked over her shoulder just before he reached her, a look of relief crossing over her face when she saw him. Charlie dumped her things into the basket he held before wiping the melted ice water off her hands.

"You okay?" he asked, sneaking a glance at a less charismatic looking Billy.

"Fine." She said. She didn't look it.

"And, uh, how exactly do you two know each other?" Billy asked, pointing between them.

"She's a family friend." Steve answered. "She's staying with me for the holidays."

Billy's gaze moved back to Charlie, the very fake grin he'd previously been wearing returning. "Well I do hope Harrington is treating you right, sweetheart."

Her blue eyes narrowed at him slightly. "He's treating me fine."

Either Charlie wasn't nearly as intimidating as Steve thought she was or Billy was just immune to her icy glare. Steve wished he could smack the grin right off his stupid face. "Well maybe I can see you again? You might need someone to show you around if you've never been here before."

"I've been here before." Charlie said, her voice as icy as her stare. "And I have someone to show me around, already. Thanks."

Billy looked back and forth between them again. Steve wondered if he picked up on how Charlie inched towards him. His smile grew tighter and seemed more forced. "Alright then." He said, taking a few steps back. "Well, maybe I'll see you two around."

Steve watched him walk away, a smug swagger in his step that made Steve want to push him over. A strange but strong sense of

protectiveness over Charlie had settled over him in the four days they'd known each other. She felt comfortable with him. Likely only with him. It was his job to protect her from anyone or anyone who might be a threat, the same way they all had for Eleven. Billy definitely classified as a threat.

He felt her tug on his sleeve, quickly snapping him out of his thoughts. He turned towards her as she wiped her nose on her hand, for a moment worrying she had heard what he thought about her. "Steve?" she asked.

"Yeah?"

"What does 'slut' mean?"

His eyes widened in surprise and he glanced over to where Billy had disappeared at the end of the isle. "Did he think that about you?"

She tugged on his sleeve again, bringing his attention back to her. "What does it mean?"

"It, uh..." his voice faltered slightly. There was no way in hell he could tell her what it meant. Not until she told him what Billy had thought about her. Obviously if the word was in his mind he wasn't exactly thinking gentlemanly things about her. "It's a really not nice thing to call a woman. And it's really inappropriate."

One of her eyebrows disappeared under her brows and she glanced at the spot where Billy disappeared. "Like 'whore'?"

"Yeah it's exactly like that." Steve reached for her arm and gently pulled her in the opposite direction. "Don't pay attention to him, okay? He's a jerk who doesn't know what he's talking about. You're not a slut."

She fell into step next to him, her expression still thoughtful. "I guess." Before he had the chance to argue that she absolutely wasn't she spoke up again. "How do you know him?"

"From school." He said, "And..." Steve looked away from her, already embarrassed. "He's the one I got in a fight with in November."

"What?" Charlie grabbed his arm to stop him. "*He's* the one that beat you up?" Steve reluctantly nodded. "Do you want me to go kick his ass?"

"Absolutely not."

Charlie rolled her eyes at him. "You can't let people just bully you around, Steve. I saw how badly he beat you up. That's not okay. Just because Max stood up to him doesn't mean you can't too."

"I will." She raised an eyebrow at him. "I *will*. But you can't fight my battles for me?"

"Why not?"

Steve sighed, "Why would you? You're leaving anyway right? You don't care enough."

"Just because I'm going to leave doesn't mean I don't care." She snapped back. Some of her intensity from the night they met was beginning to return. "Did you ever think that the reason I want to leave might be because I care."

He rolled his eyes, "How does that make any sense?"

She crossed her arms across her chest. "Maybe I don't want you to get hurt for helping me. I have a long track record of getting good people in trouble."

He raised an eyebrow at her, his lips twitching up into a smile despite how he tried to keep them straight. "So what you're saying is you care about me? That you're just pretending to hate me?"

Charlie hesitated, blinking up at him a few times. Steve anticipated seeing a drop of blood appear from her nose but it never came. "I never said I hated you."

"Not with your words."

She rolled her eyes at him and started heading for the registers again. He quickly caught up to her. "Well I don't hate you. I'm just not very good at being nice to people."

When they reached the register, Steve set the basket down and glanced over at her. Her eyes were cold and he followed his gaze, his own eyes landing on Billy standing by the entrance watching them. Almost as soon as he looked at him Steve felt Charlie's arm wrap around his waist and stay close to his side. He quickly looked away and kept his gaze fixed on the frozen bag of peas she had picked out, afraid the increased blood flow to his face would cause his head to explode.

"Will you let me know if he ever bothers you again?" Charlie asked as they walked back to the car. "I'll take care of him for you."

"You don't have to do that." He said, a small smile making its way onto his face.

"I know." She said, setting her bags in the back seat. "I want to."

Steve wondered what he'd done in a past life to be so lucky. Charlie could have dug through the garbage on any other night. Steve could have easily been upstairs in his room and not have heard her. She could have turned and ran the second she saw him. She could have snuck out in the middle of the night, or the next day when he took her to see Hopper. There were a million things that could have happened differently that would have prevented her from openly admitting she cared about him, something that made his stomach do a backflip.

"You should have heard what he thought before." Charlie said, a smug grin on her face as she got into the passenger's seat next to him. "He's definitely got some kind of superiority/inferiority complex."

"What did he think?" Steve asked, glancing around for any sign of Billy's flashy car as he drove through the parking lot.

She replied in her best impression of Billy, which was pretty accurate. "I can't believe Harrington got a girl like that. She should know what she's missing out on. Blah, blah, blah." Charlie looked over at him with a wider smile than he expected to see on her. "I would rather drink gasoline than touch him. Unless it's to punch him in the face."

"Maybe you shouldn't even do that." Steve suggested. "The contact



alone might get him off."

Charlie snorted and shook her head. "I'll kick him then. At least my shoe will create a barrier."

"Remind me to buy you a pair of steel toed boots."

She laughed again, the sound just as melodic as it had been earlier. She didn't attempt to compose herself right away and she didn't cover her mouth with her hand. For someone with such an intimidating face she had a dangerously contagious laugh.

## 7. Holiday Spirit

Charlie and Steve hurried from his car to the front door of the Wheeler's, eager to get inside and away from the cold. She hugged the borrowed jacket close to her body and stayed close to him both in attempt to stay warm. Her nose had turned bright pink in an undeniably cute way. She glanced at him while they waited for someone to answer the door and he could tell she was nervous about the party.

He offered her a smile and moved to stand closer to her. "You'll be fine." Steve told her. "You already know almost everyone who's gonna be there. And I'll stay with you the whole time."

Charlie mirrored a smaller version of his smile. "I know." She said.

Before either of them could speak again the front door swung open and Karen Wheeler stood in its place. She beckoned them inside and shut the door behind them, giving Steve a hug before turning towards Charlie. "I don't believe we've met before." She said, offering her hand. "I'm Karen."

She took her hand, almost as red as her nose. "Charlie."

Nancy appeared wearing a bright smile and dressed in a Christmas sweater. "Great, you guys made it!" she said, coming to stand next to her mother. "Mom, you've met Steve's girlfriend Charlie?"

Karen's face lit up with surprise, "Girlfriend?"

Though Steve didn't dare look at Charlie he could see her face flushing out of the corner of his eye. "Oh, um-" he began, but his voice faltered when he wasn't sure what to say.

"I'll take your jackets." Nancy said, quickly changing the conversation topic.

As they shrugged off their coats Ted called Karen from the kitchen and she quickly when down the hall. "Thanks a lot, Nance." Steve mumbled once her mom was out of ear shot.

Nancy shrugged innocently. "It was a joke." She said, though Steve knew she was full of shit. She reached for Charlie's jacket when a confused expression crossed over her face, her eyes running her over. "Steve why didn't you get her something nicer to wear?"

Charlie looked down at her outfit; a pair of jeans and long sleeve shirt she'd borrowed from him, both a couple sizes too big. "What's wrong with it?"

"I mean nothing's *wrong* with it." Nancy said, "But it's a special occasion so you should get dressed up." She hung their coats up on the rack next to the front door before raising an eyebrow at Charlie. "Do you wanna borrow something to wear?"

"Oh, um, I don't know." She said uncertainly, glancing up at Steve.

Before she could protest any further Nancy grabbed hold of her wrist. "Seriously, I don't mind at all. What's mine is yours. It's a special occasion."

Steve looked at Charlie who looked mildly terrified. He offered her a small, hopefully encouraging, smile. "I'll be right there in the living room when you get back, okay?" he said, pointing at the empty spot on the couch.

After a moments hesitation Charlie nodded her head and followed Nancy up the stairs and out of his sight. Steve turned and immersed himself into the party, heading over to where Dustin, Lucas, and Max were standing and joining the conversation.

xXx

Nancy dug through her closet, searching for something for Charlie to wear while the shorter girl took in her bedroom behind her. Though they had a similar body type Nancy got the impression that they didn't have the same sense of style. Most of her closet was filled with sweaters and blouses, all in light colors. And though she'd only seen Charlie in clothes she'd borrowed from Steve Nancy had yet to see her in any other color than black and grey.

After picking out a few options Nancy laid the clothes out on her bed

one by one and let Charlie look them over. Her pale face was difficult to read, which Nancy thought was pretty ironic considering what she was able to do.

She ran her fingers over the hem of a red velvet skirt, her eyebrows coming together. "I've never worn a skirt before." Charlie said, so softly Nancy might not have heard her if they weren't standing right next to each other.

"Really?" Charlie shook her head. "Well why don't you try it on?"

After a moments hesitation Charlie nodded and picked the skirt up off the bed. Nancy turned around so her back was to her to give her some privacy. Even from upstairs in her room she could hear the music and chatter, both slightly muffled, from the first floor. She wondered if Charlie had ever even celebrated Christmas before but knew better than to ask her. It was the kind of thing she imagined would be a sensitive topic.

"Okay." Charlie said, interrupting Nancy's thoughts.

She turned to face her and a smile broke out on her face. Even with the black hoodie she had on Charlie already looked much more like a teenager going to a party. "It looks awesome." Nancy told her, turning to face her bed and grabbing a grey sweater before handing it to her. "Try this on with it."

Nancy picked up the rest of the clothes and put them all back in their rightful place while she waited for Charlie to change. She couldn't help but smile as she imagined what Steve's reaction would be to seeing her so dressed up.

Nancy was glad that she and Steve had fully moved on from their breakup. That everything was water under the bridge. He didn't mind hanging out with her and Johnathan and she didn't mind that he very obviously had a crush on the girl standing behind her. Though she did still feel bad for the way things ended she was just relieved that there were no hard feelings. At least not that she knew of.

"How does it look?"

She turned around once again and her face exploded into a smile. For someone who usually looked so intense Charlie was absolutely adorable in the borrowed outfit. The uncertain expression she wore only added to it. "It looks great." Nancy told her, heading over to her desk and pulling the chair out. "Take a seat."

Charlie eyed her cautiously before doing as she was told and sitting in the chair in front of her desk. Her eyes fell on the items scattered across the top. "Is that makeup?"

"Yep." Nancy answered before picking up a powder compact. "Have you ever worn it before?" Charlie shook her head and Nancy hoped she couldn't read her sympathetic thoughts. "I'll only do a little bit, then."

"Okay." Charlie said, although she sounded uncertain.

Nancy picked up a powder brush and dipped it into the compact and instructed her to close her eyes before she started packing the powder across her face. Though she was a shade or two paler than Nancy was it would have to do. "Steve isn't gonna be able to keep his eyes off you." She said, smirking slightly.

With her eyes still closed Charlie pulled her eyebrows together. "Really?"

"Really. He's totally head over heels for you." Nancy set the powder down and picked up a brown eyeshadow compact. "But I bet you knew that already, being a mind reader and everything."

"I guess." Charlie said, not sounding at all convinced.

Nancy gave her a look of confusion despite the fact that her eyes were closed. "What? You haven't heard him think about you?"

"No I have. It's just..." Her voice trailed off until she was silent. Nancy leaned back, waiting for her to reply before continuing. Charlie opened her eyes, one with eyeshadow and one without. "I don't know if he means it."

She raised an eyebrow at Charlie. "You think he's lying in his thoughts?"

"Not lying." She explained. "Just... I don't know if he actually likes me or if he's just fascinated with me. Do you know what I mean?"

"I know what you mean but that's not it." Nancy assured her, gesturing for Charlie to close her eyes once more. "I know better than anyone how Steve acts when he likes a girl. He definitely likes you." She told her as she started applying eyeshadow to her other eye. "Do you like him?" The question had been on the tip of her tongue the handful of times she had hung out with Charlie and Nancy knew she would likely not get the chance to ask her again.

The question hung in the air for a few moments, the only sound coming from the party downstairs. Nancy started to get ready to backtrack and explain herself the longer the silence went on. Before she got the chance to Charlie replied, her voice barely above a whisper, "I don't know."

She quickly finished her eyeshadow and stood back up, looking over Charlie and how visibly uncomfortable she was. "Have you ever liked someone before?"

She shook her head, her black bangs falling down in her eyes slightly. "No. Never. I don't know what it feels like."

Nancy leaned on her desk, taking a break from applying the makeup and letting out a sigh. "It basically feels like having butterflies in your stomach when you're around them. And when that person says something nice to you it means more than it would if it came from someone else. And you want to spend more time with them than you would with other people. That's generally what it's like?" She looked down at Charlie. "Does that sound familiar?"

She bit down on her lower lip, her gaze falling down to the top of Nancy's desk. "A little bit." She admitted.

A satisfied smile spread on Nancy's face as she grabbed the mascara tube and leaned back down. The gears in her head started turning at lightning speed.

xXx

"Steve would you chill out." Dustin said, pointing at his shaking leg. "You're girlfriend's fine."

Steve felt his cheeks turn red and he sunk down slightly on the couch he sat on in between Dustin and Max. Mike and Eleven, who stood leaning on the wall only a few feet away, chuckled at his reaction along with the two kids sitting next to him. He was glad the music and chatter was loud enough for the rest of the room to hear the conversation.

"First of all dickhead; she's not my girlfriend." Steve said, turning towards Dustin. "Second of all; she's been up there for fifteen minutes. You have no idea how many ideas Nancy can plant in her mind in fifteen minutes."

"Nancy's annoying but she's not some mastermind." Mike chimed in. "You're giving her too much credit. They're probably just talking about girl things."

"I don't think Charlie's the type to talk about girl things." Steve pointed out.

Dustin rolled his eyes and let out a dramatic sigh. "Look, we know you're all protective of her and shit but what's the worst that can happen? She'll be down soon."

*What's the worst that can happen?* Off the top of his head Steve could think of a number of things. Nancy could tell Charlie something totally and completely embarrassing about him. Charlie could admit to secretly hating him. Nancy could tell her about his feelings for her that were apparently painfully obvious to everyone but Charlie. But of course Steve didn't want to voice these worries out loud, not wanting to take the chance of jinxing anything.

He was going to attempt to shift the conversation topic but before he could get the chance Max, who was facing the staircase upstairs, perked up slightly and said "speak of the devil."

Steve followed her gaze until his heart practically jumped up his throat and out his mouth. He spotted Nancy and Charlie walking down the stair case just before they reached the bottom. For a split

second he didn't recognize her. Steve was so used to seeing her exclusively in clothes she had borrowed from him, with the exception of the night they'd met. Seeing her wearing something so different was a shock to the system. And though a skirt and sweater didn't seem much like her style it definitely looked great on her. Steve sat frozen in place, unable to do anything but look at her, and watched as she shared a nervous glance with Nancy before her gaze moved across the room and locked with his own.

Dustin's elbow in his side brought him back to reality and Steve managed to push himself to his feet. His palms felt sweaty as he crossed the room towards her. Before he reached her he saw Nancy pat Charlie's shoulder and dart down the hallway. She looked back at him again and only a moment later a small drop of blood appeared under her nose and her cheeks flushed red. Steve hardly cared that she heard how amazing he thought she looked since he planned on telling her.

"You look great." He said, sliding his sleeve over his hand and offering it to her.

Charlie managed a small smile, using his sleeve to wipe away the small amount of blood. "Thanks." She said, not only for the compliment. "I'm not used to looking so... different."

Steve could tell she was uncertain about the borrowed clothes. "It looks good, but does it feel good?"

"I think I like jeans and boots better." She admitted. "But this is okay for tonight."

He didn't even bother trying to hold back the ear to ear grin that took over his face. "It's definitely okay." Steve reached into his pocket and pulled out a small box wrapped in bright red paper. "I was gonna give this to you later on when we did presents but I think I'll just give it to you now."

Charlie's eyes landed on the box in his hand before meeting his once more. "I... I didn't get you anything. I'm sorry."

Steve shook his head and grabbed her wrist, setting the box in her



hand. "Don't be, just take it."

Her expression turned uncertain for a moment before she started tearing off the small amount of paper, which he took and crumbled into a ball. She lifted off the top of the box to reveal a small pocket knife. Her blue eyes lit up slightly as she took it out and opened the blade, finding her name carved into it in a loopy script.

"I know you're not planning on staying forever so I wanted you to be able to protect yourself when you do leave." Steve explained. "Not that I want you to leave soon. I don't."

She looked at the blade for a moment longer before her eyes met his again and her smile started slowly creeping up into a smile. "I know." Charlie said, setting the knife in the box again and putting the lid back on before closing the distance between them and wrapping her arms tightly around his waist. Her head rested comfortably on his chest as he hugged her back, the smell of a perfume Nancy must have sprayed on her filling his lungs. "Thank you Steve."

Either his ears were playing tricks on him or she was on the verge of tears. She wondered when the last time someone had gotten her a thoughtful gift was. He held her tighter against him, "You're welcome."

## 8. What Are You Doing New Years Eve?

Steve parked his car on the side of the road about a block away from a house that was roaring with life and barely in view. Teenagers were spilling out onto the front lawn that was littered in empty red solo cups. Even from the inside of the car the chill in the January air nipped at every inch of exposed skin. He killed the engine before looking at Charlie in the passenger's seat and Nancy and Johnathan in the backseat.

"Are you sure about this?" Steve asked Charlie for the dozenth time.

"Yes." She answered for the dozenth time. "I've been to parties and gotten drunk before Steve."

Before he could reply she yanked the car door open and stepped out onto the pavement. Steve shared a glance with Johnathan in the back seat before they followed her lead. Nancy jogged to catch up to Charlie, wearing yet another borrowed outfit, a few paces ahead and left the two males behind them. The closer they got to the party the more anxiety Steve could feel start to bubble up in his stomach.

As if he were able to feel the nervous energy radiating off of him Johnathan clapped a hand on his shoulder. "She'll be alright, man." He said, "She lived in Chicago for six years, she's probably been to more parties than both of us combined."

"That isn't saying much considering Nancy and I have dragged you to every party you've ever been to." Steve joked, attempting to lighten his own mood.

They both laughed before quickly catching up with the girls in front of them as they stepped onto the lawn of the house. The group past by family faces, a few of which lingered on Charlie as they walked by. She stayed close to his side, her arm brushing against his own every few paces. Though her borrowed outfit wasn't as drastic of a change as the one from Christmas was the jeans and red jacket were still different from what he was used to seeing her in.

"Do you have a lot of friends here?" Charlie asked him as they

approached the front door.

"I don't have a lot of friends in general."

As they stepped into the house the dramatic change in temperature shocked his chilly skin. Though the rooms weren't packed to capacity there were at least twenty in each one. Charlie wrapped her arm around his as they followed Nancy and Johnathan through the house towards the kitchen. Speakers were blaring pop songs in the living room and out the window Steve spotted a pool in the backyard filled with people swimming in their clothes.

They made it into the kitchen and each grabbed a cup, dunking it into a large bowl of punch that was without a doubt spiked. Steve brought it to his lips, struggling not to cringe as the vodka slipped down his throat. He practically choked when he watched Charlie drink it as easily as water.

"How many parties have you gone to?" he asked her.

She shrugged her shoulders, wiping her chin. "I used to crash parties and get drunk enough to pass out so I would have a place to stay that night." She explained. "So, I guess you could say I've been to a lot."

Nancy, whose tolerance for alcohol was very low, gaped at her. "How old were you when you started doing that?"

"Probably fourteen."

"Shit."

Over her shoulder Steve spotted a familiar head of red hair come into the room. He cursed under his breath and attempted to stand in a spot where Charlie would shield him from her but she was much too short to hide him at all. Steve stared down at his cup as he anticipated what was likely an unavoidable conversation.

"Oh hey guys." The familiar voice of Carol said as she sauntered over to them, a cup in hand. It was obvious by the slur in her voice and stumble in her step it wasn't her first drink.

"Hey Carol." Steve said half heartedly.

She opened her mouth to say something but quickly shut it when her eyes landed on Charlie. Carol took her face in before her lips curled up into a grin Steve recognized. "And who's this little lady."

"Charlie." She answered flatly.

"Weird name for a girl." Carol commented.

"Being named after a type of song isn't?" Charlie shot back.

Nancy snorted and quickly turned around so Carol wouldn't see her laughing. Both Steve and Johnathan struggled to hold back grins. Carol, on the other hand, was not at all amused. "So where are you from, *Charlie*?"

"Chicago. River North more specifically."

Carol swirled her drink around. "So what brings you to our neck of the woods?"

Charlie shifted closer to Steve. It was such a microscopic movement he doubted anyone else noticed it but him. He glanced down at her and noticed something hidden in her otherwise blank expression. Though what exactly it was he wasn't sure. He brushed his hand against hers in what he hoped was an encouraging gesture.

"Steve's a family friend, I came down to visit him while his family's away." She answered quickly.

Carol looked at Steve and cocked her head to the side. "You never told me you had family friends in Chicago."

"You never asked." He answered with a shrug

Before Carol could say anymore Charlie turned to face him. "Can you help me find the bathroom?" she asked.

Steve didn't need to be asked twice. He kept one of his hands on the small of her back so he wouldn't lose her as they made their way through the crowd and into a small hallway on the opposite side of the house. As the crowd started to thin they passed by a number of couples making out.

Charlie stopped and turned back to him once they were in front of the bathroom door and he had a feeling she just wanted to get away from the conversation. "I don't like her." she told him.

"You and me both."

"She was a bad friend to you." Charlie said, leaning on the wall and taking a long sip from her drink. "Most of your friends before Nancy and Johnathan were bad friends to you."

Steve sighed and leaned on the wall next to her, tilting his head back and looking up at the ceiling. "I really know how to pick 'em, don't I?"

In his peripheral vision he saw her turn her head towards him. "Why do you do that?" she asked him, "Pick bad friends?"

"I don't know." He said, which was fairly untrue. He just didn't want to admit the truth to her. "Maybe I'm just really bad at reading people."

There was a beat of silence, likely while she debated whether or not she should call him out for lying. After a moment or two she turned her whole body to face him. "Did you really kiss her for New Years in ninth grade?"

Steve let out a laugh and watched a smile break out of her face. "It was, like, the third time I ever got drunk. I wasn't making good decisions. Why, was she thinking about it?"

Charlie nodded. "She thought 'he really downgraded on New Years kisses in the past few years.'"

He raised an eyebrow at her. "She thinks you're a downgrade?"

"Apparently."

"She's either dumb or blind."

Her smile widened and she lifted her cup to her face in an attempt to hide it. "I think she's dumb." She said. "I also think she downgraded in New Years kisses. You're much better looking than Tommy H."

Steve felt his cheeks getting warm at her compliment. He grabbed her cup and tilted it towards him. "Did you chug that drink? Are you drunk already?"

She rolled her eyes at him and punched his arm lightly. "Oh please. It takes much more than that. I bet I'll be the one holding your hair back in there later tonight." She pointed into the bathroom.

"Promise to cut me off if I try and get into the pool."

Charlie laughed, a sound that echoed in his ears. It was hard to believe how closed off from him she had been just a little more than two weeks ago. "No way am I missing out on the opportunity to see that." She brought her cup up to her lips and tilted her head back until she had finished the rest of her drink. "I need another one." She announced, grabbing the sleeve of his jacket and pulling him into the crowd with her.

Though Steve was worried about Charlie getting too wasted it quickly became apparent that it wasn't an issue. In the first few hours of the night he attempted to keep up with her and the number of drinks she had. But by drink number four he was starting to stumble from room to room while she seemed perfectly fine, so he decided to slow down. Though Charlie remained relatively sober she did drink enough to loosen up more than she ever had before. As midnight approached she didn't protest when Nancy pulled her out to the dance floor when a song they both liked came on.

Steve leaned against the doorway between the kitchen and dining room, where everyone was dancing. The longer Charlie stayed the more hope he had that she wouldn't end up disappearing. But he knew he couldn't fool himself. His parents were coming home from vacation in a little more than a week and that once they did she wouldn't be able to stay with him anymore. Though he planned on proposing she stay at the cabin with Hopper and Eleven he had no clue how to go about asking her. Her and Eleven were beginning to develop a sisterly bond but Steve could tell she still wasn't Hopper's biggest fan.

He decided not to stress too much about the future and headed outside to get a bit of air to clear his head. Everyone who had been in

the pool had gone inside to get away from the cold weather, leaving the only people outside besides Steve a handful of couples looking to get some privacy. He leaned against the railing of the back porch and rubbed his now cold hands together in an attempt to warm them up.

"Your girl's one hell of a dancer." An approaching voice behind him said, breaking the quiet of the backyard. "Pretty good looking too when she puts in the effort."

Billy Hargrove appeared in his peripheral vision with a smirk on his face and a cup in his hand. Steve kept his eyes fixed on the pool, already feeling his annoyance beginning to grow. "Too bad she's not interested in you."

"Yeah but she's interested in you, right?" he asked, gesturing at Steve with his cup.

Steve rolled his eyes. "Why do you care?"

Billy held his hands up in fake surrender. "Hey, I'm just trying to look out for you, man. After things with you and Wheeler ended, then she got with Byers, I was worried about you." He leaned his elbows on the railing next to Steve, much too close for comfort. "I kept waiting for you to get back out there. I thought it would never happen, or that maybe you were queer. I'm proud of you."

Sarcasm was dripping from his voice and puddling at their feet. Though Steve would have normally just walked away the alcohol in his system convinced him that staying was a good idea. "Yeah, whatever." He said dismissively, shaking his head a few times.

Billy took a sip of his drink, his gaze moving out towards the backyard. "I bet she's a freak in the sack."

"Shut up." Steve said through gritted teeth.

"We all know that Wheeler is Miss Missionary. But, what's her name, Charlie? You know she's into all kinds of weird shit. The bitchy ones always are."

Steve straightened up and pushed Billy just enough to make him stumble. He quickly regained his balance but only seemed amused.

"Don't talk about her like that."

"Or what?" he laughed, setting his cup down on the railing. "You'll beat me up? Cause you really fucked me up last time."

Steve rolled his eyes, not wanting to think of his last confrontation with Billy Hargrove. "Just stay away from her, dipshit."

"Oh, I get it." He said with a short laugh. "You're worried that once she gets a taste of what she's missing out on she'll dump your ass. Hate to say it but I don't blame you. A girl like that can never get it all from one guy."

Anger swelled up in Steve's chest and before he knew what he was doing he stepped towards Billy and gave him a hard shove in the chest. He could tell instantly he was screwed by the way fury exploded on Billy's face as he stepped back towards him. He hardly registered that Billy had even raised his fist until it connected with his face.

Steve stumbled back a couple feet, grabbing onto the railing to keep from falling down. The alcohol in his system combined with the quickness of his stumbling made his vision blurry and he had to shut his eyes before the world started spinning. Though he only had a second before relief when his eyes flew open at the feeling of Billy grabbing him by the shirt and forcing him upright. He had to blink a few times for the other males' face to come into focus, but when he saw the look Billy had on he wished he hadn't.

"You're really begging to get your ass kicked right now, aren't you?"

He knew that if he apologized he would likely get to walk away with only one punch. But when he remembered what Billy had said about Charlie, and the disgusting way he looked at and thought about her he knew there was no way he would even apologize in his direction.

"Bite me, Hargrove."

A fire lit up in Billy's eyes and only a split second later his fist once again connected with Steve's face. He stumbled back farther than before, getting closer to the three steps leading down to the lawn.



Out of the corner of his eye he could see someone on the other side of the sliding glass door notice a fight was breaking out and grabbing a friends' attention. His reaction time was slowed due to his many drinks and he hardly had time to brace himself for yet another blow. Billy's fist connected with his lip and only a few seconds later the metallic taste of blood flooded into his mouth.

"You know, you really ain't shit Harrington." Billy told him, rubbing his knuckles with his non-dominant hand. "You're a washed up jock with a social life failing faster than your grades. And I bet it's just a matter of time before Charlie dumps your ass like Wheeler did."

His words hit Steve harder than any punch ever could. His stomach twisted into a knot so tight he could have easily leaned over the railing and threw up. But people were starting to come onto the back porch so he figured he shouldn't. "You don't know what the fuck you're talking about." He spat, quite literally since blood splattered onto the porch when he spoke.

"Don't I?" Billy asked, walking towards him again and giving him another shove. "You know, I think you know I'm right. And you're too much of a pussy to admit it. And *that's* why," he shoved him again, "you're never gonna keep a girl. Cause you're a pussy."

"Hey!"

Steve caught a glimpse of Charlie storming over only seconds before she grabbed the back of Billy's jean jacket and yanked him backwards. Her hands landed on his arms with an iron grip as she forced him to face her. A deep scowl was written across her face, as ice cold as her eyes. "You keep your hands off him, you hear me? If I hear that you even looked at him the wrong way I'll make you fucking sorry."

Billy's momentary look of shock quickly morphed into a smirk. "I see, he's too much of a wuss so you have to fight his battles for him."

Charlie's brows creased deeper and she grabbed Billy by the back of his neck and forced him down to her height so she could whisper in his ear. Steve was sure he was the only other person that could hear her. "You think the beatings from your dad are bad? If you ever

bother Steve again I'll show you what it's like to really get your ass kicked." She let go of him and took a few steps back, pointing her thumb at the door behind her. "Now get the fuck out of here."

He gaped at her for a few moments, the shock at how she could know something so private momentarily paralyzing him. Eventually his face screwed up in anger again and he gave Steve one last glare before pushing his way through the small crowd that had gathered on the front porch.

As soon as he passed her Charlie's expression fell and she hurried over to Steve, her hands grabbing either side of his face while her eyes frantically inspected him. "What the hell happened?"

He put his hands on her wrists and attempted to push her away but she resisted him. "Charlie I'm fine."

"Liar." She said, brushing her thumb against his lip and making him wince. "I could hear you from all the way inside. We need to go home."

He groaned and tried to lean away from her. "No, we don't."

"Yes, we do." She insisted, grabbing his hand and pulling him towards the house. "We're finding Nancy and Johnathan and getting the hell out of here."

xXx

A little less than an hour later Steve was standing in front of the bathroom mirror, changed into sweatpants, and gently attempting to wipe the dried blood off his lip and cheek. The more time passed the more swollen they got and he only hoped that Billy's knuckles were suffering. He heard Charlie's quiet footsteps approaching down the hall before she appeared in the doorway holding a frozen bag of peas. She still had on her borrowed clothes from Nancy and promised to give them back in the next couple of days.

"Does it hurt?" she asked, leaning on the sink next to him.

"Yes." He admitted, running the cloth under the faucet again before bringing it up to his lips. "Could be worse, though. It has been worse."

"Steve why the hell would you do that?"

"You know why."

There was a beat of silence before Charlie sighed and turned towards the towel rack, grabbing another hand cloth and running it under the warm water. She wrung it out and gently dabbed at the small cut on his cheek. He did his best not to wince at the contact. "You can't fight every person who says something you don't like about me."

"Can't I?" he asked sarcastically.

"No, you can't. You'll be fighting the whole world." She met his eyes in the reflection of the mirror. "It's not worth it."

"That's bullshit." He muttered under his breath.

Charlie's hand dropped to her side. "Sorry?"

Steve sighed before setting the cloth down on the sink and turning to face her. "Look, I know you push everyone away so you're not used to people caring about you, but you kind of dropped the ball with me. That's what people do, Charlie. They stand up for people they care about. And I know that's why you stood up to Billy."

"So?"

"So why are you allowed to care about me but I'm not allowed to care about you?"

"Because."

Steve rolled his eyes. "Well that's a pretty shit reason."

"Because I fuck things up with everyone who's ever been important to me and I don't want to do that with you, okay?" she tossed her cloth into the sink. "Come downstairs and drink something when you're done in here, you're gonna be hungover as hell if you don't."

She turned and disappeared into the hallway before he could even think about replying. While he listened to her footsteps head down the hall and down the stairs he cursed at himself for getting cross with her. He knew it was because he was drunk. Though he meant

what he said he knew he would have said it differently if he was clear minded. As he worked to clean up the rest of the dried blood he thought about how he would go about apologizing to her while simultaneously praying he hadn't just scared her off.

A little less than ten minutes later, after all the blood was cleaned and his lip was sufficiently numb, he made his way out of the bathroom and down the stairs. He could hear the kitchen radio playing and followed the sound until he found her leaning against the counter with a glass of water beside her. She picked her head up when she heard him come in and his eyes followed him as he crossed the room towards her and grabbed the water, downing it in only a couple of gulps.

"Better?" she asked as he set the glass down.

"Better." He agreed, leaning against the counter facing her. "Look, I'm sorry about what I said. I should be thanking you for preventing me from getting my ass kicked, not getting angry at you."

A small smile made its way onto her face as she shook her head. "It's fine. I should be thanking you for standing up for me. You're right, I'm just not used to people caring about me enough to do that."

"Well get used to it." He told her, "Because as long as you're here I'm not going to let people say whatever they want about you in front of me."

Something in her expression changed and for a second he thought she might cry. Her posture straightened up and she angled herself to face him. He debated asking her if she was alright but before he could she stepped towards him and put her hands on either side of his face, bringing him down to her level and pressing her lips against his.

Every cell in his body was all of a sudden wide awake at the unexpected contact. His brain seemed to switch to autopilot, leaving him to act solely on instincts. Steve's lips moved against hers while his arms wrapped around her small waist, keeping her close to him. Slowly everything around them started to fade away into the background until they were the only two things in the house left.

## 9. Opening Up pt 2

Yiiikes the chapters are getting shorter and shorter. And this chapter is kind of plain, but things are going to pick up soon I promise!

---

Charlie and Steve were sprawled out on the couch, their feet propped up on the coffee table and the television on in front of them playing soap operas. On the table beside their feet was two glasses of water, a bottle of advil, and their empty breakfast plates. The volume on the television was barely loud enough for them to hear due to the headaches they shared. Though Steve was sure his was worse than hers. At some point her head hand landed on his shoulder and although she smelled faintly of the alcohol they drank the night before he didn't tell her to move.

"What time is it?" she asked in between episodes, her voice quiet and slightly hoarse.

Steve squinted to make out the time on the clock on the other side of the room. "2:30."

Charlie groaned and rested her forehead against his shoulder. "Can't this day be over already? I'm sick of how sick I feel, and I'm sick of you thinking about how sick you feel."

"Sorry." He said half heartedly.

"It's okay." She said, picking her head up and slowly getting to her feet. "I'm grabbing a snack, want anything?"

"Whatever." He replied.

She turned and shuffled down in the other room and into the kitchen, holding her head with one of her hands. Though she had only been staying with him for a little more than two weeks everything about her being in the house had become incredibly routine. Since he usually woke up before her he showered while he waited for her to get up and made breakfast once she did. He spent the better part of the morning trying to get her to tell him more about her life and

experiences in the lab. They usually went out for lunch and stayed in for dinner, alternating between watching tv and just talking. They seemed to never run out of things to talk about.

His parents were coming home in a few days and he had no idea what he would do with himself without her in the house. Steve's once lonely home had finally become a place where he had someone that cared about him, even if it was in her own way. Even without ever voicing her care for him Charlie had made him feel more wanted in two and a half weeks than his parents had felt in years. His mom tried and he loved her for it regardless of her hopelessness, but his father was ice cold.

Steve heard Charlie's footsteps coming back and straightened his posture. She stepped into view and he immediately noticed her tense demeanor. Her hand gripped a bag of chips much tighter than necessary and her eyebrows were knit with concern just under her bangs that were starting to grow out.

"Is that true?" she asked him, her voice sounding strained.

He could feel the confusion in his face. "Is what true?"

"That I make you feel more wanted than your parents have in years?"

Steve's gaze quickly fell down to his lap, his cheeks turning bright red with embarrassment. "You weren't supposed to hear that."

Charlie came over, placing the bag of chips on the coffee table before sitting on the couch facing him. In his peripheral vision he saw her bite down on her bottom lip while she looked down at her hands. "You never talk about your parents." She pointed out. "Just that they're out of town."

"There's not much to say." He mumbled.

"If you tell me about your parents you can ask me anything you want about the lab." She offered.

Steve forced himself to look up at her, reading her expression to see if she was pulling his chain. "*Anything?*"

"Anything."

He sighed and leaned his head back against the couch, taking a moment to think about how best to explain his parents. His mom was easier so he knew he'd start with her. "My mom is... lost."

"Lost?"

"It's like her body is there but her mind isn't always." He continued. "She gets this look on her face like she's somewhere else and it's hard to bring her back sometimes."

"Where is she?"

"In her youth." Steve shook his head against the back of the couch. "When she was in college she was going to school for performing arts. She was going to do two years local and then move to Los Angeles and become a movie star. I think she could have, too. She's beautiful and charismatic and when she walks into a room she owns it. But she met my dad when she was a sophomore and he was a senior and she got pregnant with me so she dropped out. And I know that when she gets lost in her mind she's thinking about what her life would have been like if I never happened."

He felt Charlie's hand wrap around his own, small and soft compared to his. Her thumb gently grazed across his palm, a silent encouragement. Steve wished he could live the rest of his life feeling that feeling. "What about your dad?"

Steve let out a humorless laugh. "He's an asshole." He said without an ounce of remorse. "He's exactly the type of asshole a parent doesn't want their daughter to get knocked up by because you know he won't be shit for a father." Steve used the hand that wasn't holding hers to rub his forehead. "He ruined my mom's life with a kid he doesn't even care about."

"He cares about you, Steve."

He turned his head to look at her. "I know you're trying to make me feel better but he really doesn't. Which is fine, I don't care about him. It just sucks that she's not happy."

Her usual poker face was filled with sympathy. Though she looked beautiful with an animated expression he wished she wouldn't feel so bad for him. She leaned her head against the back of the couch only a few inches away from his face. Up so close he could see flecks of darker blue in her irises and a microscopic scar underneath her eyebrow.

"I'm sorry Steve." She said, her voice quiet enough to almost be drowned out by the tv that was still on.

"It's okay." He told her. "Are you sure I can ask you anything?"

"Anything."

He hummed quietly as he thought. There were a million questions he wanted to ask her and the thought of picking just one gave him a slight headache. Considering how tight lipped she usually was Steve doubted he'd have another opportunity to ask her absolutely anything so he knew he needed to choose wisely.

"Tell me about Dr. Brenner. The one Eleven needs your help finding."

Her demeanor immediately changed to show how uncomfortable she was. Her gaze dropped down to their hands sitting in her lap and she once again bit down on her lower lip. The longer he knew Charlie the less she tried to hide her emotions through her body language. And though he was glad that she was feeling more and more comfortable around him seeing how upset the question made her made him regret asking it in the first place.

"He was in charge of overseeing me and the other experiments." She told him before he got the chance to ask her if he should think of something else. "He made himself out to be a father figure to get us to trust him more. And because we didn't know what a real father figure was like we thought he was the greatest person in the whole damn building."

"What kind of stuff did he do?" Steve asked her after a moment of hesitation.

She shifted slightly in her spot on the couch. "When I did really well



in an experiment he would give me a present. I remember the first time I ever manipulated someone's thoughts he bought me a sketchbook and a really big pack of markers." He watched her swallow a large lump in her throat. "I never really disobeyed him until around the time I thought about leaving. I started getting older and rebellious for the first time ever, and because I can manipulate people's thoughts I knew he was a little scared of me. Sometimes he would make me wear headphones with really loud music playing so I wouldn't be able to do it to him."

He gave her hand a light encouraging squeeze. "What happened when you disobeyed him?"

"I got put in the dark room."

"What's that?"

"It's basically a cell with no windows or lights that he would lock me in for a few days when I did something wrong." Charlie explained. "Twice a day he would have someone bring me food, but they weren't allowed to talk to me when they did. When I got older and stronger he installed a speaker to play really loud music so that when I was in there I couldn't make anyone let me out."

"Shit."

"Right before I left I heard him think that he regretted making me because I was the only one powerful enough to be a threat to him."

Steve shook his head, wondering how someone so awful could actually exist in society. How a whole building full of people could live with themselves knowing they were hurting innocent kids. "That's so fucked up." He said, mostly to himself.

Charlie shrugged her shoulders. "It is what it is." She told him. "What can I do about it, you know?"

He turned his body to face her, keeping hold of her hand. "How do you deal with it? I mean that's really heavy shit. I can't even imagine going through something like that and even being able to function every day."

She held his gaze for a few moments, her eyes unblinking as she thought of how to reply. "I don't know." She admitted. "I think... I'm usually more concerned with just surviving on the streets that I don't really have that much time to really think about it all the time."

"How did you survive?" he asked her. "For six years all by yourself in the city?"

"This is a lot more than one question." She pointed out.

"Tell me."

"I had to steal a lot." She admitted. "I don't like it but I didn't have a choice. But it's not like I could get a job or anything. There's no proof that I even exist."

Steve knew he had to ask her. He'd been avoiding the topic as much as possible for the past few days but he knew he couldn't avoid it forever. His parents flight home was in less than a week and he knew there was no way he'd be able to keep Charlie in the house and hide her from them. They weren't that stupid. Besides, Charlie had spent most of her life hiding from someone. It wasn't fair for him to expect her to do it forever. She didn't deserve to do it forever.

"Hey, um," he began. She lifted her gaze from their hands and Steve knew he had to just spit it out. It wasn't like she wouldn't know what he was thinking about. "Have you thought about what you're going to do when my parents get home? I mean, I want you to stay here, but I know that's not really realistic."

"I know." She agreed. "I think... I think I might as Hopper and Eleven if I can stay with them. And if they say no I'll just figure it out."

"Figure it out?"

"I saw an abandoned house somewhere near the woods." She told him, "I can stay there if I get really desperate."

Steve perked up slightly, trying to hide his excitement as best he could. "Does that mean you're going to stay in Hawkins?"

The corners of her lips twitched upwards into a microscopic smile.

"Yeah, I think so." Charlie admitted, "I've never had this many people care about me before. I think it would be kind of a dick move to just disappear on you guys."

"It would be a total dick move."

Her smile doubled in size and, to his surprise, she closed the space between them and pressed her lips against his. Kissing Charlie was a full body and soul deep experience when he was sober and Steve planned on doing it as much as he possibly could.

## 10. The Void

Whoops sorry it's been so long since I uploaded! (even though I feel like I say that every time I actually do upload). This chapter is a bit different from all the rest and I'm sure you'll figure out why. Enjoy!

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"Can you stop pacing? They'll be hear any second just chill out."

Mike Wheeler stopped mid step and turned to face the girl sitting at his kitchen table. Charlie had on a pair of jeans borrowed from Nancy and Steve's varsity jacket. Her feet, wearing combat boots, were propped up on the chair next to her. She looked up from the plate in front of her when Mike turned to face her, one of her eyebrows disappearing underneath her bangs. Most of the time, when she was drowning in Steve's clothes, she looked much younger. Other times she looked too old to be hanging out with middle schoolers.

"I'm nervous." Mike shot back. "This is a big deal."

"I know that." She replied, setting her fork down next to her now empty plate. "Your anxiety fills up the whole room. I'm suffocating."

After dropping Charlie off at the Wheeler house Steve set out to get Eleven from the cabin in the woods. Though she likely never voiced it to her Eleven was elated to have Charlie around. Mike knew she was disappointed that things with Kali hadn't worked out the way she wanted to. She felt like she was getting a second chance at having a family with Charlie in town. There was only so much about the lab that Mike could understand. It helped to have someone around who truly knew what she had gone through.

Eleven decided that, with Charlie's help, she was finally ready to search for Dr. Brenner in the void in hopes of getting justice for herself and the other experiments he had tortured. Mike and Steve would be there for emotional support no matter what happened. As he crossed the room to sit at the table parallel to her Mike wondered how Charlie wasn't nearly as nervous as he was. Maybe she was just better at hiding it than he was. Or maybe she really was as stone cold as she sometimes seemed.

"Have you ever tried looking for him before?" Mike asked her, hoping she would say yes and give him an idea of what to expect.

Instead she shook her head. "No, not really." She said. "I've always been too scared." There was a beat of silence before she spoke again. "Has Eleven ever tried?"

"No, I don't think so." Mike told her.

"What about when you guys were separated?"

Mike felt his stomach drop even at the mention of one of the most difficult times in his short life. Most people didn't dare to bring it up in front of him so hearing someone talk about it so openly was a bit shocking to his system. His eyes fell down to his hands in his lap, unable to meet Charlie's intense gaze.

She spoke again before he got the chance to. "She never really talks about it, you know."

"It's hard." He answered simply.

In his peripheral vision he saw her pick her feet up off the chair and sit leaning over the table. "How can you stand to be around Hopper after he did that to you guys?" she asked him. "If someone did that to me I wouldn't be able to be around them without punching them right in the face."

Mike felt his pulse starting to pound in his ears, his mind overwhelming at both what he was thinking and hearing. Flashes of unpleasant memories went through his mind at the speed of light. Had he not seen them a million times before he wouldn't have been able to tell what they were. "I don't want to talk about this."

"Do you ever worry that he's going to separate you guys again?"

He snapped his head up, his eyes meeting with hers. "I don't want to talk about it." He said sharply.

For a moment she was still, not a single muscle in her body moving. He was ready to apologize when she leaned back in her chair and held her hands up. "Alright." She said, letting her hands fall into her

lap. "I'm sorry. I won't ask again."

xXx

"I don't want to talk about it."

Mike's thoughts were pushing up against her own, begging to be read. Charlie had been making a point recently to not invade the privacy of people's mind every chance she got. But how could she not be tempted by Mike's reaction to a few simple questions? Steve had told her that talking about things was a way to heal. How were Mike and Eleven supposed to heal if they completely shut down every time someone brought it up.

*Just this once*, she told herself, *for his own good*.

She leaned back in her chair, holding her hands up in surrender. "Alright." She told him. "I'm sorry. I won't ask again."

She really was sorry. And she technically wasn't asking again. So it wasn't a lie.

Mike's defensive posture deflated slightly. "It's alright." He said, pushing his chair out and getting to his feet. "Want something to drink?"

"Sure."

He crossed the room towards the sink, opening the cabinets and grabbing two glasses before turning on the faucet. Charlie waited until his back was to her before she invaded his mind.

Her vision went black for a split second, just long enough for animalistic panic to fill her body. She blinked once and suddenly she was no longer in the kitchen of the Wheeler house. The room was large with rectangular tables and the lights were off, giving the room a dark blue glow. It was uncommon that someone's memories were so intense that she quite literally got sucked into them, but not impossible. For a moment she was too disoriented to realize what was going on around her. Charlie covered her eyes with her hand while she steadied herself and waited for her head to stop spinning.

"Promise?"

"Promise."

Familiar voices brought Charlie back to a past reality. She dropped her hand while her eyes landed on the source. A group of kids a year and a half younger and missing two members. The sight of Eleven, bald and weak as she lay on the table, was jarring. Charlie made her way over to the kids, none of them noticing her approach since she wasn't really *there*. The closer she got the more she felt as if a strong hand were squeezing on her heart. It took her a moment to realize what the source of the feeling was. She wasn't just living Mike's memory, she was feeling his emotions as if they were her own.

By the time she reached the kids tears started pooling in her eyes, and when she got close enough she saw Mike's doing the same. She reached out for him in attempt to comfort him but stopped herself when she remembered she wouldn't be able to touch him. She was forced to watch helplessly.

Behind them the door swung open, crashing against the wall, and a monster stormed in letting out an unworldly screech. She and the others whirled around to face it, fear paralyzing her as her eyes took in the ghastly creature. Charlie was unable to move while Dustin and Lucas attempted to use their rocket launchers to keep it at bay. But it was no use. The Demogorgon continued towards them.

It was only a few feet away from them when the monster went rigid a split second before it was propelled to the other side of the room, pinned to the blackboard by an invisible force. Charlie realized what it was only a moment before the boys did, turning in time to see Eleven jump down from the table. A dangerously determined expression was etched in her face.

Though she knew her actions wouldn't help anything Charlie stepped in her path in an attempt to stop her. "Eleven don't." she said to someone who couldn't hear her. "Please *don't*."

Eleven walked through her as if she were a ghost and continued towards her target. Still facing where she had once been she watched Mike attempt to stop her before Eleven threw him back against the

wall. Panic started taking over, the icy feeling of helplessness creeping over every inch of her body. She ran the short distance to Mike before dropping on her knees in front of him, tears spilling down her cheeks the same time they did on his.

"It's going to be okay, Mike." She said, attempting to reach out to him. Her hands went right through him until they were pressed against the wood of the cabinets he leaned against. Though she knew the emotions she was feeling weren't her own they still felt just as real. A deadly cocktail of panic, desperation, and helplessness made her body ache with the need to do something and the knowledge that she couldn't.

Charlie looked over at her shoulder, knowing she had no choice but to watch the events before her unfold.

"Goodbye Mike."

Mike and Charlie's hearts broke simultaneously.

Both Eleven and the Demogorgon let out ear piercing screeches, one of pain and the other of power. Charlie clapped her hands over her ears and turned back to face Mike, another scream harmonizing with the other two. Though she couldn't feel herself do it she knew it was her. The lights above her started to flicker rapidly and she shut her eyes before placing her forehead between her knees. She promised out loud to never invade someone's mind ever again if she could just wake the hell up.

"Get me out!" she screamed as loud as she could. "Mike let me out! *Mike!*"

"*Charlie!*"

A pair of hands landing on her shoulders startled her and when she picked her head up she was no longer in the Hawkins middle school. She was sitting on the kitchen floor of where she had been only minutes before, her hands still over her ears and her throat raw from screaming. Mike was knelt down in front of her, a similar look of panic she had just seen only on an older face. She didn't think she had ever been so glad to see someone in her life.



Charlie threw her hands around his neck and let out a desperate sob. She felt his arms wrap around her waist, rubbing her back in attempt to comfort her. Charlie heard the front door open over her repeated apologies and seconds later Steve and Eleven ran into the room. Worry crossed over both their faces at the sight before them. Eleven stood frozen in the doorway while Steve came over and knelt down next to them, brushing his hand through her hair.

"You're okay." He said as Mike let go of her and let her crawl into Steve's arms. He held her tightly against his chest while she calmed herself down, never once asking what had happened. Only telling her that she was okay. Charlie knew if she wasn't so traumatized by what she had just experienced she might have fallen in love with Steve Harrington right then and there.

xXx

"Are you sure you're okay to do this?"

"I said I was fine."

She wasn't really. But her and Eleven had important business to take care of and she couldn't let her emotions get in the way of finding the man that had ruined their lives. She could tell Steve didn't believe her by the way he looked at her but he chose not to say anything, instead turning towards the television and messing with it until it turned to static. Eleven and Mike embraced, the blindfold clutched tightly in her hand. Steve returned to Charlie's side, his hand finding the small of her back.

"Promise you won't push yourself too hard?" he asked her. "That if it's too scary you'll come out?"

She nodded her head though she knew she was lying to him. "I will."

He seemed only slightly convinced. "Mike and I will be here the whole time, alright?"

Charlie forced herself to smile. "I know."

Eleven pulled away from Mike and turned towards her, finally ready to do what they'd both been avoiding. They sat on the floor facing

each other, Steve and Mike on the couch only two feet away. Eleven flashed her an uncertain smile before they tied the blindfolds over their eyes. Charlie could feel her heart pounding in her chest and she reached for Eleven's hand for both their reassurance.

It only took a few moments for both of them to enter the void. When Charlie opened her eyes again it was just her, Eleven, and total blackness. Charlie held Steve's varsity jacket close to her, the familiar scent of his cologne somewhat calming her nerves. Eleven had borrowed Mike's sweater for the very same reason.

"You guys remind me of me and Mike." Eleven told her, still holding onto her hand.

Charlie felt her cheeks catch on fire. She knew that she wasn't the only one that heard Eleven's comment. She didn't dare say anything about how she felt about him, knowing he would be able to hear her too. "Mike and I." she said instead.

Eleven rolled her eyes at her. "Whatever."

There was an echoed noise in the distance that silenced them both. They shared a nervous look before heading forwards, their footsteps making small splashes in the shallow water beneath them. Charlie's eyes struggled to make anything out in the void, a world entirely of black.

"Do you feel him?" Eleven asked her, inching closer to her side.

"I feel someone." She answered. "I just don't know if it's him."

It was a similar feeling to the one when she knew someone was looking at her. Eyes on the back of her head. Watching her every move. It was an evil presence, which definitely fit Papa, but it was different somehow. Older. Bigger. Inhuman. Charlie didn't understand it so she kept her mouth shut as they continued forward.

It felt like they'd been walking forever but she knew it had only been a few minutes. Time in the void was messy, just like everything else. All of a sudden she spotted something darker and blacker against the rest of the void, sensing it's movement more with her instincts than

her vision.

Charlie stopped mid step and Eleven quickly turned to her. "What is it?" she asked, the panic clear in her voice.

"Something's here."

"*Something?*"

"Not Papa."

Eleven glanced over her shoulder before looking back at Charlie. "Read its mind." She told her. "I don't feel anything."

Charlie's gaze moved behind her sister and she had to squint her eyes to make the form out again. Even from far away she could tell it was tall. She could feel blood start to trickle out of her nose as she struggled to penetrate the creature's thoughts.

"You can do this."

Only moments later Charlie knew she had made it in and that she had been correct. Whatever was with them in the void wasn't human. Human's thoughts played like a recording in her head. But the thoughts she read from what was with them were different. She felt them in her, like intuition. She couldn't have explained it if she tried.

"It knows you." Charlie told her, meeting her eyes for a moment before looking at the creature once more. "It's mad. You... hurt it."

"The Demogorgon?"

Charlie shook her head. "The Demogorgon you hurt is dead. This is something else." She shut her eyes, attempting to strengthen the connection. "Last year. It was about to be free but you closed the gate."

"The Mind Flayer."

She opened her eyes again, feeling the creatures recognition at its name. Charlie nodded her head. "Yeah, that." She said. "The gate is weak. It's going to come back. Soon."

"It can't."

Images started flashing through Charlie's mind. Demogorgons running freely around Hawkins. The ground collapsing until where Hawkins ended and the Upside Down began were no different. Dead and rotting bodies littered through the streets and serving no other purpose than food for other worldly monsters. The sky red and fiery. And the Mind Flayer in total control of both worlds.

"It will."

## 11. The Unthinkable

whoops this update is really short. but this chapter is definitely setting up for the next few so please bare with me! we're really building up to something here so I promise it will (hopefully) be with the wait.

---

A crowd almost identical to the Wheeler's Christmas party filled the living room though there was no spirit in the air. The room was silent while Charlie paced in front of the television that was still set to static. From where he sat on the couch Steve could practically feel her nervousness and despite how badly he wanted to reach out for her he kept his distance for the time being. She needed time to process what she'd seen. Every few minutes her eyes would meet his and she would flash him a small smile. Using her powers she would let him know she was grateful that he was there with her.

"Wait, go over it one more time." Max said, sitting between Lucas and Dustin on the floor. "What exactly did it say?"

"It didn't say anything." Charlie said, crossing her arms over her chest. "I didn't hear its thoughts like I do with humans. It's like... I could feel them. Does that make sense?"

"No."

Charlie rolled her eyes and stopped pacing, turning to face the group. "What did you guys do last year? How did you defeat it?"

"Well we didn't really defeat it, did we?" Nancy asked. "I mean it's still alive. We just made sure it couldn't get out again. At least we thought we did."

"But what *happened*?" Charlie pressed.

Will, who had been silent since he entered the house, finally spoke up. "It possessed me." He said, his voice quiet. Everyone felt silent while they listened to him. "A little bit every day for a year until it finally took full control over me."

Charlie crossed the room to where he sat in the recliner, kneeling down in front of him so they were the same height. "How did they get it out?" she asked softly.

"It likes the cold." He told her. "They had to burn it out of me."

She looked up at Joyce who stood behind her son. "What exactly happened when it came out of him?"

Joyce shifted, visibly uncomfortable talking about the possession of her son. "This black mass came out of him and flew out the door and he was fine." She said. "I don't know what it was, though."

"That was its soul." Charlie said, pushing herself to her feet again. "Was that before or after Eleven closed the gate?"

"Before." Hopper answered.

She walked up to the front of the room and began pacing again, tapping her pointer finger against her chin. "So that's how to get it to leave its host, but that doesn't help us right now. We need to know how to kill it before it can open the gate again."

"The Mind Flayer's an all powerful being that's lived for centuries." Mike said. "It can't be killed."

"Everything that has a weakness can be killed." Charlie shot back. "Its weakness is fire, therefore it can be killed. How?"

Everyone fell silent again, the only sound in the room being the television and the floor creaking under Charlie's footsteps. Steve's eyes scanned the faces of his friends, hoping someone would be able to come up with a solution since he sure as hell couldn't. Part of him wished he'd been able to talk Charlie and Eleven out of going into the void so the whole situation could have been avoided. But he knew if he had the gate would have likely been opened again.

"I closed the gate." Eleven said quietly, her arms crossed against her chest as she leaned on the wall next to the television. "It can't get out again."

"The more times the gate is opened and closed the weaker it gets."

Charlie told her, her voice sounding more sympathetic than before. "It's not your fault. You're one person. But if we kill the Mind Flayer I doubt anything else in there is powerful enough to open it. We just have to figure out how."

"There is way." Dustin spoke up from the floor. "But we can't do it."

Charlie raised an eyebrow at him. "What is it?"

"If we trap the soul of the Mind Flayer in our world we could theoretically kill it. Eleven could use her powers to hold it still while someone lights it on fire." Dustin explained. "But there's no way to bring the soul of the Mind Flayer here without putting it inside a host, which we don't have."

"We have a host." Charlie said.

"And who's the host?" Lucas asked skeptically.

"Me."

Steve immediately pushed himself to his feet, hurrying over to her. "No, no way." He said. "Absolutely not. I'm not gonna let you get possessed, Charlie. We just have to think of something else."

"Give me another idea and I'll gladly do it." She shot back. "But if this is our only option we have to do it and you know it."

Steve remembered how Will had been when he was possessed. Tied down so he wouldn't hurt anyone, his eyes void of any recognition when he saw them. There was not a trace of the caring boy that had gone missing the year before. He was totally and completely lost while the Mind Flayer took over. Even the thought of Charlie going through a fraction of that made him feel sick to his stomach.

"Then we'll figure something else out." He insisted. "But there's no way in hell I'm gonna let you do this. You can't."

"If you won't let me I'll do it by myself." Charlie said, just as stubborn as he was. "If the gate opens and the Mind Flayer gets out it will kill *everyone*. Starting with the people that locked it up last time. You guys. You know it's unfair to protect me instead of protecting the

entire human race."

He knew. He just didn't want to admit it.

"Steve's right." Hopper said, leaning his elbows on his knees. "We need to think of something else. It's too dangerous."

"Well I'm all ears to any other ideas."

Everyone fell silent once more, each of them looking to each other to volunteer a different plan. The more time passed without a different solution the more Steve felt himself start to panic. How would he be able to live with himself if he let her get possessed by the Mind Flayer? Especially if something happened to her. Of course he didn't want the gate to be opened. But the idea of the Mind Flayer getting loose and someone he cared for so much getting hurt were equally terrifying.

She turned towards him, reaching for his hand. "I can do this." She said once his fingers were laced through hers. "I'm better equipped to do it than anyone because of my powers."

"Let me do it." Steve offered in a last-ditch attempt to get her to change her mind. "I'll get possessed by the Mind Flayer. I don't care."

"I care." She insisted. "It has to be me and you know it."

It was clear no one was thrilled about the idea of Charlie becoming a host. But it was equally clear that no one had any other idea of what to do. Reluctantly they set on making a plan on what to do.

Charlie, Eleven, Steve, and Hopper would break into the lab, all armed. Steve and Hopper would make sure that the girls didn't get attacked by any monsters that may have broken out. When they got to the gate Eleven would use her powers to get Charlie as close as she could before she offered herself as a host. Once she was possessed she would be tranquilized, blindfolded, and handcuffed while they brought her to Hopper's trailer so that the Mind Flayer would have no clue where it was.

While they went to the lab everyone else would be at the trailer preparing. All the doors and windows would be boarded up so the



soul of the Mind Flayer couldn't escape once it left Charlie's body. She would be tied down so it couldn't fight back and they would try to burn it out of her without hurting her. Once the Mind Flayer left her body Eleven would use her powers to keep it from escaping and they would light it on fire. And, hopefully, it would be killed.

Mike attempted to insist he come with them to the lab to keep Eleven safe but eventually they got him to agree to go with the others to the trailer. Using several cars they all left to drive to the other side of town to get ready. Once they were gone Steve found Charlie in the back yard, sitting on the back steps and staring out at the Wheeler's yard.

She held his varsity jacket close against her body, one of her legs bouncing up and down. He could tell even before he sat down next to her that she was nervous. She had been attempting to hide it in front of everyone but didn't do a very good job. Once he was next to her she moved closer to him.

"I don't want you to do this." He told her.

"I know." Charlie turned to face him, grabbing his hand and setting it in her lap. "I'll be okay." She said, though she didn't sound as certain as she did before. "What's the worst that could happen?"

"Where do I start?"

She smiled, the expression almost meeting her eyes. "I'll be okay." She repeated.

Steve angled his body to face hers, bringing her hand up to his lips and pressing a kiss on her knuckle. Charlie was absolutely remarkable. He wasn't the type of person who typically believed in fate and destiny, and he never had until recently. There was a reason Charlie had come back to Hawkins after so many years. There was a reason she had chosen his house to dig through his garbage. There was a reason his parents had went away particularly long.

He *needed* her to be okay. He was undoubtedly going to fall in love with her if he hadn't already. Being around Charlie, seeing her be more comfortable with him than she was with anyone else, finally

made him sure he was meant to be in Hawkins.

"I'll make you pancakes for the rest of your life after this." He told her. "And I'll buy you every record from the Beatles, and I'll never let someone like Billy even look at you again."

"You're too good for me, Steve Harrington."

"I'm not."

She leaned in and pressed her lips against his, every cell in his body lighting up like a Christmas tree at the contact. Her hands ran gently through his hair while his landed on her small waist. Despite the early January chill he was perfectly warm. Though she had insisted that she would be okay it was clear they both knew they might only have a little more time together. There were a million things Steve had wanted to do with her and realizing they might not have all the time in the world was suffocating.

"Please don't leave me." He mumbled against her lips, every ounce of fear he felt clear in his voice.

Charlie's lips left his as she began placing short kisses up his jaw. "I won't."

They both knew she was just saying it to make him feel better.

## 12. The Mind Flayer

ooo damn things are really kicking off here. not much I can say right now except for thank you all so so much for reading this story. I think I'm especially grateful because I'm writing the last chapter right now. as always I hope you enjoy!

---

In the back seat of Hopper's truck Charlie, tied up and blind folded as well as sedated with the very same medication used on Will the year before, lay draped across Steve's lap as they drove to the cabin in the woods. He could hear Eleven's sniffles in the front seat but didn't dare try and look at her in the mirror. He hardly managed to keep his own tears under control. The drive seemed to last forever and Steve passed the time by running his fingers through Charlie's hair.

After the Mind Flayer possessed her and she passed out Eleven lifted her back up to the ground. They quickly tied her up and blindfolded her and sedated her all before she could wake up. Steve volunteered to carry her all through the lab and out to the car. She was surprisingly light considering she was dead weight.

He stared down at her as the car drove through the woods, doing his best to keep himself composed. He should have tried harder to convince her to change her mind. He should have fought her harder. She should have done something more. Steve knew if things with the Mind Flayer went wrong and Charlie got hurt in the process he would never be able to forgive himself. There were so many things he wished he could have had more time to tell her, so many things he wanted to do with her. More than anyone Charlie deserved a painfully boring and average life. Would she ever be able to have it?

When the car pulled to a stop in front of the cabin in the woods Steve noticed how all the windows had been boarded up. Mike and Nancy were sitting on the front steps and as soon as the car came into sight he sprang to his feet and ran to meet his girlfriend. Eleven practically collapsed into his arms and began to cry once more. Steve turned his focus to carrying Charlie out of the car so that seeing Eleven so upset wouldn't bring on his own tears.

Nancy came over to close the car door behind him once Steve got out, her gaze momentarily dropping to the unconscious girl in his arms. "How are you doing?" Nancy asked him softly.

He noticed Joyce, Will, and Max come out the front door and stand on the porch, all of them watching both Eleven and Charlie. His protective instincts made him want to hide her from their prying eyes and he had to remind himself that everyone was there to help. "I'll be okay when this is all over." He told Nancy.

She put her hand on his shoulder, giving him the best encouraging smile she could muster. "She'll be okay." She said, "She's strong. She'll fight it off."

"Yeah, but what if she can't?" Steve asked, making his voice quiet in case it threatened to crack. "What if she overestimated herself and did something she shouldn't have? I should have tried harder to stop her."

"Steve, listen to me." Nancy said sternly. "Do you seriously think any amount of begging would have changed her mind? You know how stubborn she is. Do you *really* think she would have listened?"

He knew she had a point but he didn't want to admit it. True, he knew it would have taken a bit more than begging to change Charlie's mind. But that didn't mean he shouldn't have tried harder. Try as he might Steve couldn't help but think of all the possible things that could go wrong once he carried Charlie into the cabin. Nancy must have been able to see the reluctance in his face by the way she patted his shoulder and gave him a nod of encouragement.

She trailed behind him as he made his way over to the cabin and up the porch steps. Steve had been in Hopper's cabin a handful of times to pick Eleven up so she could meet up with the rest of the kids. But seeing it with all the windows boarded up and furniture pushed against the walls, the only source of light coming from the fireplace and a single lamp, made it look undeniably eerie. Once he was inside Hopper pulled one of the chairs from the kitchen table into the middle of the room.

With both Hopper and Johnathan's help Steve set Charlie down in the chair and tied her down by her ankles and wrists. Once they double

and triple checked that she was secure Steve pulled the blindfold over her head and took the container of smelling salts that Joyce had kept just in case from the year before. He held it under her hanging head and waited, silently praying, for her to wake up.

All at once she took in a sharp breath and her head snapped upright. Steve and a couple others in the room jumped back at such a sudden movement. Charlie looked down at her bound wrists and attempted to yank them free a few times before her gaze lifted. Her eyes locked with Steve's and he felt like he could have been sick right then and there. Instead of the now familiar ice blue he expected to see when she looked at him her eyes were such a dark brown her irises and pupils were hardly different.

Her eyes left his, without a single sign of recognition on her face, and scanned the group of people standing behind him. Slowly a smirk spread on her lips and it was clear to Steve that Charlie was no longer in control. His stomach flipped over as he took a few steps back from her, wanting to keep some distance between himself and the monster that had invaded someone he cared about.

A low chuckle came from her throat before it turned into a full, maniacal laugh. Eleven, who stood only a few feet away from him, quickly hid her face in Mike's neck and attempted to stifle a sob. Nancy moved to stand next to Steve and put her hand on his back while the Mind Flayer's laughter began to die down.

"I see what's going on here." It said. Though the voice sounded like Charlie it was crystal clear it wasn't her speaking. "Am I supposed to be intimidated by this little set up?" the Mind Flayer waved its tied up hand, "I appreciate all the trouble you went through to get me here but it's really unnecessary."

"Don't be so smug." Hopper said, not-so-subtly adjusting the gun in the holster on his belt. "You don't exactly have the upper hand here."

It raised a single eyebrow, "Don't I?" It asked, its eyes suddenly moving to lock with Steve's once more. "Are you really going to let them hurt her just so they can kill me?"

Steve managed to swallow a lump that settled in his throat. "It's what

she wants." He croaked out.

The Mind Flayer rolled its eyes. "She's a freak of nature with daddy issues she doesn't know what she wants."

"Don't talk about her like that." Steve snapped.

But it continued as if he hadn't interrupted. "She only volunteered because she thought your little plan would work. Well, I hate to burst your bubble but it won't. I've been sitting on a plan ever since Miss Jane closed the gate I'd been working so hard to open. I'm not leaving this body because it gets a little hot in here."

"You're leaving her body." he insisted, leaning in to Nancy's touch slightly. In his peripheral vision he could see her watching him, a worried expression on her face. "You're leaving her body no matter what."

The smirk the Mind Flayer wore grew. "Even if you have to burn me out of her? Even if you have to permanently disfigure the girl that you *love*?"

The word pierced a hole in Steve's chest. He knew it was true. He loved Charlie. It was painfully obvious despite the fact that he attempted to ignore it as best he could. Steve could feel a few people in the room look at him, waiting to hear how he would respond. The longer he was silent the more smug the Mind Flayer looked.

"You're not man enough." It said before he got the chance to respond. "You can't do it."

"Watch me."

Steve went over to the fireplace on the opposite side of the room grabbing the fire poker next to it and sticking it into the flames. His stomach churned with the knowledge of what he was about to do but his anger at the Mind Flayer over powered his premature guilt. He watched the tip of the poker start to glow with heat, not daring to spare even a glance at his friends until the last possible second.

Once the bottom inch of the fire poker was bright yellow he pulled it out of the flames and turned to face the rest of the room. He watched

the Mind Flayers black eyes fall on the instrument, the fear in its expression making it clear it knew exactly what was going to happen. Steve had to constantly remind himself that it wasn't Charlie, and if he didn't go through with the plan she would have gotten possessed for no reason.

He took a simple step before the Mind Flayer flinched as much as it possibly could while tied up. "Wait! Hold on a second!" It cried out, its previous tough demeanor crumbling to pieces. "Why don't we make some kind of deal so no one has to get hurt?"

Steve glanced at his friends who seemed just as weary and uncertain as he did. It seemed that for once he was in charge. "I'm listening."

"Let me go" the Mind Flayer said, "Let me open the gate and do as I please. If you do I'll leave the girl completely unharmed and Hawkins will be spared. Everyone you know, and everyone you love, will be fine. It's really a win-win situation."

He felt Nancy looking at him before he met her gaze. For a moment he panicked that she would tell him to agree to the deal. No one in the room knew Charlie as well as he did, and he knew none of them cared about her as much as he did. What if they wanted to make the deal? Though he knew there was no way in hell he would let that happen he also knew that if he was completely outnumbered it would take a lot to win that fight.

When he looked at her she shook her head 'no' and he let out a small sigh of relief. Steve admittedly felt a bit silly for thinking that after all the trouble they had gone through to get the Mind flayer exactly where they wanted it they would give in for some deal.

Steve turned to face the creature again and was certain he could see a small flicker of hope somewhere in its expression. Clearly it didn't inherit Charlie's mind reading capabilities when it entered her body, otherwise it would have known to not even bother.

"Not a chance in hell."

The expression of the Mind Flayer hardened and it let out an animalistic growl that made the hair on Steve's arms stand on their

ends. "You're making a big mistake. I'll kill every single fucking one of you."

But Steve wasn't listening. His eyes were fixed on the end of the fire poker, still glowing red hot with heat. He had to swallow down both his anxiety about what he was going to do and the feeling like he could be sick at any moment. Steve could feel everyone's eyes on his back, waiting for him to make some kind of move.

He turned towards his friends, looking specifically at Nancy, someone he'd looked to for guidance for over a year. "Where should I do it?" he asked, his voice coming out just as shaky as he felt.

Her eyes glanced over at the Mind Flayer before meeting his again. He could tell she, along with almost everyone else, was struggling to keep her composure. "Somewhere she can hide under her clothes."

Steve nodded, then looked at Eleven to make sure she was ready to catch the Mind Flayer's soul. From where he stood he could see her swallow down a lump in her throat before taking a step forward, wiggling her fingers at her side.

There was no more procrastinating. If he waited much longer he'd had to stick the fire poker back into the flames and Steve wasn't sure he would be able to follow through if he had to wait much longer.

He did his best not to look at Charlie's face as he crossed the room towards her possessed body. The cabin was deadly silent other than the cracking flames and the creaky floorboards under his feet. When he reached the Mind Flayer he checked that the binds on Charlie's wrists were tight enough to keep it restrained. As he did he could feel its black eyes fixed on him but he refused to look up.

"She'll never forgive you." The Mind Flayer hissed, its voice so low Steve doubted anyone else could hear.

"You clearly don't know her well enough." Steve shot back, kneeling down to double check the restraints around her ankles.

The Mind Flayer scoffed. "Like you do? You've known her less than a month. She's a stranger to you."



Steve reached for the zipper of the sweatshirt Charlie had borrowed from him earlier that morning, pulling it down until it was fully unzipped. He grabbed onto the hem of the tank top she had on and pulled it up above her hip so that about two inches of her stomach was exposed. Bile began to rise up his throat and he struggled to swallow it back down and keep himself from puking on the floor.

"Do it."

He looked up and had to keep himself from letting out a sob when his eyes met with a pair of familiar blue ones. Steve could tell by the strained look on her face that Charlie was struggling to stay in control. A deep crease was in her forehead and he could see she was biting the inside of her cheek.

Steve could have immediately broken down just at her two words but managed to get away with only one tear escaping. "I don't want to."

"Steve I don't care if it'll hurt and I don't care if I'll have a scar for the rest of my life, okay? So you shouldn't either." She said, "Please just do it."

Steve nodded, getting to his feet once again and tightening his grip on the fire poker. Before he could make a move Charlie leaned forward, her head hanging low, and a strangled cry escaped her. He could see her knuckles turning white from holding onto the arms of the chair so tightly. Steve opened his mouth to ask if she was okay before she lifted her head again and her eyes had returned to the pitch black color of the Mind Flayer.

He really had run out of time for stalling. Steve grabbed the end of the fire poker with both of his hands and connected the tip to the bare skin of Charlie's stomach.

The Mind Flayer contorted and twisted with pain while a blood curdling and demonic sounding scream filled the cabin. Steve resisted the urge to cover his ears and kept the poker in place until her skin started to smoke. When he pulled it away he had to once again swallow down bile at not only the sight but the smell of her burnt skin.

He used the need to heat the fire poker again as an excuse for turning away and having his back to everyone in the room. Steve watched the orange glow slowly return to the yellow color it had been when it put it in the first time. Behind him he could hear Eleven sniffing and Mike whispering to her that everything was going to be okay.

Steve walked back over to the Mind Player, which was still painting and moaning in pain. It was slouched back in the chair with its head tilted back. It flinched when Steve stood in front of it once again.

"Please don't." It begged, slowly picking its head back up. "Take the deal, I'll spare you."

Had Steve not already made the first burn he might have considered it for a split second. But since he already got the worst part over with, along with Charlie's reassurance, Steve didn't even respond before sticking the poker next to the first burn.

Watching Charlie's body and hearing Charlie's voice so full of pain made a tear or two escape from the corners of his eye but he knew he was doing the right thing. Knowing he was doing the right thing, however, didn't make it any easier. The only thought that got him through what he was forced to do was that it was the only way to get Charlie back in control of her body.

Steve pulled the poker away once the second burn started to smoke. The Mind Player desperately gasped for air, all while whimpering in pain. How many times was he going to have to burn her before the Mind Player left her body? How many times would he have to scar her?

The Mind Player picked its head back up, still breathing heavily and wincing every time it moved a muscle. Its black eyes connected with Steve's and a small smirk appeared. "You're never gonna forgive yourself for this."

Before Steve could even think to respond the Mind Player tilted its head back and opened its mouth. A black cloud shot out and bolted for one of the boarded up windows. A few people in the room shouted for Eleven to get it but Steve had a feeling she didn't need their reminder. The soul of the Mind Player bounced off the wood

and froze in place.

Blood trickled out of Eleven's nose while Hopper, Steve, and Johnathan all took lighters out of their pockets. In a matter of seconds the soul of the Mind Flayer was completely ignited. They all stepped back to a safe distance and watched the soul twitch in the air, struggling against the heat and Eleven's powers. If Steve listened loud enough he could have sworn he could hear it screeching.

The fire seemed to last almost as long as the torture, but in reality it was likely only a few seconds. All of a sudden the fire stopped and the black cloud that was the Mind Flayers soul evaporated.

## 13. The Aftermath

Okay so I'm hoping none of you noticed I updated with the wrong file. And we're not gonna talk about it lol. Always, I hope you enjoy.

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Steve and Hopper quickly moved to untie Charlie from the chair while Joyce pulled out a first aid kit she'd brought in her purse. He carried her over to the mattress pushed against the wall and set her down as carefully as possible, doing his best not to look at the burns on her hip. But his eyes seemed to have a different plan. Since he was so close to her he could faintly smell her burn flesh, a smell that made his stomach churn dangerously. If that wasn't graphic enough the burns were gruesome. Her burns skin was a deep red color with black charred edges and Steve could tell it was deep.

He knelt on the floor next to the mattress and ran his fingers through her hair while Joyce and Nancy got to work on her burns. Eleven appeared in the corner of his eye, her nose and eyes bright red as she tried her best not to cry, with Mike close behind her. She knelt down on the ground beside Steve and watched Charlie's sleeping form, seemingly too scared to touch her.

"She's gonna be okay." Steve told her, holding back tears of his own. "She wouldn't have volunteered if it would put her in danger, right?"

Eleven nodded, but she didn't seem to be too convinced. "Right."

Though he knew it wasn't a good idea Steve spared a glance at her burns. A small amount of puss was starting to surface that Nancy was carefully wiping away with a cloth so they could put anti bacterial ointment on her wounds before bandaging them. Steve felt as if the walls and ceiling were closing in on him at a rapid speed. As much as he didn't want to leave Charlie's side for a second he also knew that he couldn't keep his composure for much longer. He told Eleven that he'd be right back before pushing himself to his feet and walking the short distance to the bathroom.

Steve shut the door behind him and leaned his back against the cool wood, staring up at the ceiling as he attempted to take deep breaths.

Try as he might to clear his mind the images of her burns and the screams that came out of her were persistent. Now that he was alone his stomach lurched dangerously. He collapsed on the floor in front of the toilet bowl just in time. His stomach emptied as he retched into the toilet, hoping that afterwards he'd be able to keep his composer. He vomited three times before his body to be finished and he wiped his mouth off with some paper before leaned back against the tub.

He should have tried harder to talk her out of the plan. He should have used any means necessary to keep her safe. But Steve believe her that she could take care of herself. When it came to surviving without any shelter or income she absolutely could. But was she, a teenage girl, capable of taking on such a powerful force such as the Mind Flayer all on her own? Steve seriously doubted it. And though no one else wanted to admit it he knew they all doubted it too.

All he wanted was for her to be safe so she could have a chance at a normal life. But at the same time Steve knew that she and Eleven still had to worry about finding Dr. Brenner, the reason why they were dealing with the Mind Flayer in the first place. Though he didn't want to admit it there was a chance that she wouldn't be able to have a truly normal life until the Hawkins Lab was totally and completely eliminated as a threat.

The sound of screaming interrupted his thoughts and he immediately jumped to his feet. He burst out of the bathroom and hurried back out to the living room as Charlie's screams turned into pained whimpers. When he came back into the room he spotted Charlie laying on her side, her hands tightly clasped around Eleven's. Tears were streaming down both their faces and Eleven managed to keep her cries to choked sobs.

Charlie's face lit up when her eyes landed on him standing just a few feet away, a weak smile breaking out. One of her hands let go of Eleven's and reached out to him. He quickly snapped out of his daze and hurried to her side, sitting on the edge of the mattress and holding onto her hand.

"Hey." She said weakly, her voice coming out horse.

"Hey. You did it."

Her smile grew and she closed her eyes for a moment. "Told you."

As hard as she could in her weakened state she pulled his hand towards her. He took her silent hint and leaned down, wrapping his arms underneath her waist and hiding his face in her neck. Steve felt one of her hands land on his back, her thumb gently rubbing back and forth. As if he was the one that needed comfort.

Since he was so close to her he could faintly smell the burnt flesh on her hip that made his stomach churn once more. He squeezed his eyes shut and hid his face more in her neck. Steve was very aware of the fact that everyone in the room was likely watching them but he found himself not caring. In fact, he found himself not caring about anything other than the fact that Charlie was okay. What more could he ask for?

"I'm sorry." He said, his voice muffled against her jacket.

Steve felt her fingers take a fist full of his shirt. "Don't be." She told him, her voice quiet so no one else could hear. "I wanted you to do it."

He struggled to keep himself from letting out a sob, feeling the eyes of everyone in the room on his back. He was determined not to lose it until he had a moment of privacy again.

Steve felt Charlie turn his head in the direction of Eleven, who was still close by and trying her best not to cry. One of her hands disappeared from his back and reached out to the younger girl. Eleven grabbed on tightly, her bottom lip beginning to quiver. "I promised I wasn't going anywhere until we found him, right?"

Eleven nodded, some of her curls falling in her eyes. "Right."

One by one people started to leave. Will, who was very obviously shaken up, was taken home by Johnathan shortly after it was clear everything would be okay. After that Nancy brought Dustin, Lucas, and Max home after making Steve promise to call her if anything happened later on. The last to go home was Mike, who assured

Eleven we would call her later or even come over if she needed him to, before he got in Joyce's car. Before she left she gave Steve specific instructions on how to deal with Charlie's burns once he brought her home. It wasn't like he could take her to the hospital.

"You have really good friends." Charlie said once he returned to her side again. "For once."

Didn't he know it. Though they were an odd group it was the best one he could ask for, made even better by the addition of Charlie. "They're your friends now too."

A small smile spread across her face, probably the biggest one she could manage with the pain she was in. "I've never had friends before."

His stomach lurched with pity at the life that had been forced onto her. Charlie was such a special person. She deserved all the friends in the world. Steve wasn't sure if she and Eleven would ever be able to go into the void again to look for Brenner but he hoped they would. He deserved to pay for everything he'd done to them.

"Can we go home?" she asked, her voice weak and quiet.

Steve felt himself blush. Something about Charlie calling his house *home* made him feel warm. "You sure you're okay to move already?" he asked her. "I don't mind waiting."

She nodded. "I'm sure." Charlie assured him. "Stop worrying."

Charlie wrapped her arms around his neck and he carried her bridal style since she was too weak to walk. Eleven insisted on being let outside the cabin so she could go in the car with them. She kept in step with Steve as he carried Charlie out to the car and made sure she didn't hit her head when Steve got in the back seat still holding her. Eleven sat in the passenger's seat but faced the two in the back the whole time.

As they drove to Steve's house Charlie stayed curled up in his lap. Every time they went over a bump or pothole she let out a small whimper that broke Steve's heart. He wasn't used to seeing Charlie so

weak and vulnerable. Though she'd intimidated him at first he missed the strong front she put up. He hated to see her hurting.

When they pulled up to his house Charlie reached for Eleven's hand. "I'll call you tomorrow, okay?" she told her. "But you need to stop worrying. It's just a little burn, I'll be fine."

"It's not little." Eleven said, "It's bad."

"We've both been through worse." Charlie reminded her. "I can handle pain. And I promise if something happens you'll be the first to know."

Eleven didn't look too satisfied with the answer but nodded her head anyway. "Okay. I'm coming over tomorrow, too."

"You are?" Hopper asked.

"She is." Charlie confirmed.

With Hopper's help Steve managed to get Charlie out of the car successfully. They waited to drive away until Steve got the door open and closed behind him. He practically carried her up the stairs and into his bedroom. She groaned in pain as he helped to lower her down onto his bed and let out a long sigh once she was flat on her back. Steve sat on the edge of his bed, wrapping his hands around hers. He hated not only seeing her in pain but feeling like he was totally and completely helpless.

"Do you want to take something for the pain?" he asked her.

"No."

"Why?"

"I don't want you to leave?"

Steve pulled her hands towards him and pressed a kiss on her knuckle. "I'm coming right back, but you need to take something. I don't like seeing you like this."

She closed her eyes and groaned again. "Okay. Fine."



He stood up and hurried down the hall and staircase until he reached the kitchen. Steve poured a glass of water for her and grabbed the bottle of Advil sitting on the counter, opting to bring the whole bottle rather than a few pills. The images of Charlie's burns kept forcing themselves into his mind and he rushed to get back to her, hoping seeing her would help him distract himself.

When he got back to his room he helped her sit up as much as possible and gave her the painkillers before she collapsed flat on her back again.

"Stop looking at me like that." She groaned.

"Like what?"

"Pitiful." Charlie turned her head to look at him. "I've gotten burns before. I used to cook meals and keep warm with a fire in a garbage can."

Steve didn't want to picture it but, once again, his mind forced him to. "Why are you so convinced that I can just stop caring about you and chose not you?"

She shrugged. "I guess I'm just not used to it." She admitted. "And I guess I'm... scared."

"Of what?"

Charlie closed her eyes. "That you are gonna stop, except too late. And I'm going to care about you too much and get myself hurt." She winced. "I'm being too honest."

"So what you're saying is you think I'm a heartbreaker?"

She smirked. "Yeah, I guess so."

"Well I promise I'm not. Anymore." He squeezed her hand gently. "You are way too important to me for that to happen. You're stuck with me for as long as you can handle me."

Charlie pulled his hands toward her, a silent signal for him to lay down next to her. "I have a confession to make."

"What's that?"

"I didn't think I was going to be okay." She admitted. "But I didn't want anyone else to do it."

"You shouldn't have done it."

"Well it all worked out fine, didn't it?"

Steve didn't want to say yes so he didn't say anything at all.

"I think... I think I'm gonna stay in Hawkins." Charlie told him, breaking the short silence.

Steve perked up, a hopeful smile spreading onto his face. "Wait what? Really?"

She nodded. "Yeah. Tomorrow I'm gonna ask Eleven and Hopper if I can stay with them once your parents come home, since I obviously can't stay here after that."

"What made you change your mind?"

"You." She said, "And Eleven. I can't just leave and pretend like this never happened like I do everywhere else."

"How long do you think you'll stay?" Steve asked.

"As long as you want me to."

"Looks like you'll be here a while."

"Good."

## 14. Epilogue

Here we are at the last chapter! I really hope everyone enjoyed reading it as much as I enjoyed writing it :) Each comment you guys left made me smile and I'm really glad you stayed along for the ride.

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*January 7th 1985*

Charlie looked up at Hopper's cabin, a box of toiletries in her hands and butterflies in her stomach. She'd been to the cabin more than once in her short time in Hawkins yet it looked different somehow this time, despite everything being the same. The title of *home* was the only thing that had changed.

She felt an arm wrap around her waist only a second before Steve appeared by her side. Though she could tell he was doing his best to suppress an expression of worry he wasn't doing a very good job of it. "You okay?"

Looking up at him she nodded her head, her bangs brushing in her eyes. "Yeah, I'm good." She said, flashing him a smile to convince him. "It's just... a big change."

"I know." Her boyfriend leaned down to press a kiss on the top of her head. "But it's all good change, right?"

"Right." Charlie agreed. "How many more boxes are there left to bring in?"

"Two after this one." He said, tapping the top of the box she was holding. "Then we can go out for lunch."

Charlie excitedly headed inside the cabin to the room she now shared with Eleven. Another bed had been put into the room, both against the wall on opposite sides of the room. Steve had helped her pick out bedding, clothes, and anything else she might need for the move. His parents were coming back from their vacation later on that night and Charlie was glad they managed to move her out in time.

After setting the box she was holding Charlie took a step back and looked around the room she now called her own. The cabin was small and modest to say the least, and no place on earth would have quite the same place in her heart as Steve's house, but it was her home. The first proper home she'd ever had.

To think she could never met Steve and his friends had dreams about the lab not been bothering her blew her mind. Though she'd only been in Hawkins for a handful of weeks she couldn't imagine being anywhere else.

Hopper poked his head into the doorway and interrupted her train of thought. "Everything's brought in." he said. "We're thinking of going to lunch at Benny's. That sound good?"

She turned to look at him. "Eleven's coming too?" Hopper nodded, to her surprise. "Okay, I'll be out in a second."

"We'll meet you in the car."

Once he was gone and Charlie heard everyone go outside to wait for her she went into the bathroom down the short hall and closed and locked the door behind her. It was like an itch on the back of her head, somewhere inside her brain, that she'd been doing her best to ignore for the better part of the hour. Once she was alone in the privacy of the bathroom she walked over to the mirror and gripped her hands on the percaline of the sink.

Charlie squeezed her eyes shut and tilted her head down, a groan of struggle escaping from her throat. She knew it was only a matter of time before either she'd have to tell them or someone would notice, specifically Steve, but for now she was keen on keeping it to herself.

She let out a sigh and opened her eyes back up to look at herself in the camera. The sight of brown eyes on her familiar face was jarring and she immediately brought her hands up to rub her eyes.

It took a little while, and a lot of focus, for her eyes to return to their icy blue color and for her mind to be cleared. When she felt normal once more she let out a sigh of relief and hurried to join her friends before she started to slip again.